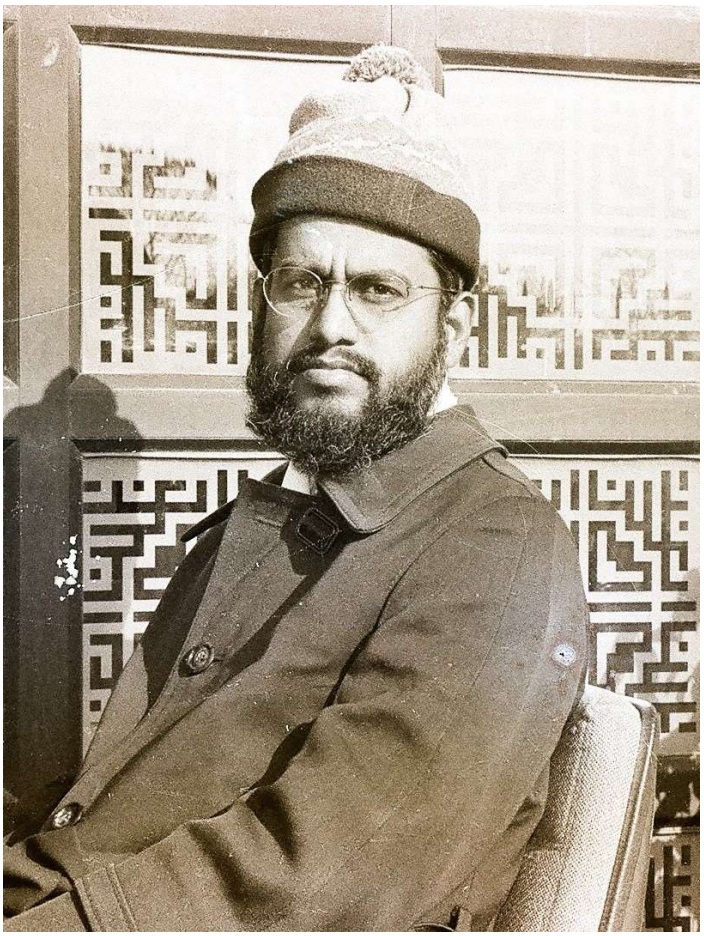
Rashid Shaz



Not Dead Yet

A Memoir

In the night of Indian slaves, no dawn is found,
No sunlight's passage through this heavy soil.
Bestow your gaze of mercy upon us,
For in the East, no Muslim suffers more in toil.

شبِ ہندی غلاماں را سحر نیست
بایں خاک آفتابے را گزر نیست
بما کن گوشۂ چشمے کہ در شرق
مسلمانے زما بیچارہ تر نیست

Not Dead Yet

A Memoir

لا يموت فيها ولا يحيىٰ

Neither shall they perish, nor shall they persist,

Rashid Shaz

An Unpublished Manuscript

About the Book:

"Not Dead Yet" is more than just a memoir; it is a raw and unfiltered attempt to capture the essence of an autobiography. As you turn the pages of this book, you will encounter numerous familiar voices, and at times, it may seem as though you have an age-old connection with these characters. Suppressed and shattered voices, broken people, and disfigured lifeless bodies from which life has been stolen. These unfortunate souls don't even comprehend what has genuinely transpired.

In the echoes of history, where the haunting specter of the Holocaust relentlessly chases the Jewish story, and the crushing weight of the Nakba engraves itself into the Palestinian collective memory, the Indian Muslims find themselves adrift in a sea of sorrow, searching for the elusive words to encapsulate the immense tragedy that has forever altered their existence.

On the surface, this is the story of one individual's life, but the authentic days and nights of the Indian Muslims are chronicled in these memoirs in such a manner that the reader pauses and ponders why the sequence of events and hidden meanings within them have remained unknown until now. For many, this book will serve as an eye-opener. However, one inherent flaw in this narrative is its inability to assign a name to the great catastrophe faced by Indian Muslims, despite its vivid descriptions. Intriguingly, this could also be considered its strength, as until a new and fitting vocabulary emerges to narrate extraordinary events and incidents, how can the author truly capture the essence of their experiences?

About the Author:

Rashid Shaz, a distinguished professor at the Center for Promotion of Educational and Cultural Advancement of Muslims in Aligarh Muslim University, is also the head of Peace India International, a non-profit organization based in New Delhi. In addition, he serves as a Goodwill Ambassador for ISESCO, working to foster understanding and dialogue among various nations and cultures.

Dedicated to my sons, Abraham and Mohammad,
And myriad young men and women of their generation,
Notably my students, who bear the weight
Of breaking the unyielding cycle of despair.

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1
Maze of Mysteries

One day, in the vast and intricate landscape of my dreams, I saw my father who had passed away. He stood at the doorway, the very place where he often spoke his goodbyes in a low, almost inaudible voice as I left on my numerous journeys, seeking to understand the intricacies of life and the world that lay before me. In his hand, he held the worn, beloved copy of the Holy Quran, the one that meant more to him than life itself, its pages marked by the passage of time and the devotion of his touch.

His face bore an expression of peace and joy, so profound and genuine that it seemed as if he had stepped out into the crisp air of a winter morning, where the first rays of sunlight gently caressed the frozen ground. His eyes, filled with an unspoken yearning, met mine as he said, "Why don't you write? It was you who were meant to compose the next part of this story, to give it life and meaning."

I was amazed to see the copy of the Quran, generally called "Hama'il Sharif," in my father's hand after such a long time. In the chaotic days of emergency, they had callously stripped him of this cherished copy. As I wandered through the far reaches of the world, whenever I stumbled upon a beautiful copy of the Holy Quran, I couldn't help but think of it as the perfect gift for him. Once, I brought back a specially illuminated manuscript, adorned with intricate calligraphy, from Istanbul for him. He carefully examined it, a look of pure joy on his face, and then his gaze drifted into the silent void, as if he were searching for the Hama'il Sharif of his childhood – every single page of which had been forever imprinted on the canvas of his memory. The Holy Quran was lovingly taught to all of us siblings by my father himself, with unwavering dedication. He never considered it suitable to place this significant responsibility in the hands of anyone else. This

led to discussions on its profound contents and meanings, nurturing grand thoughts and ideas within our young, impressionable hearts and minds. Consequently, the world began to reveal itself in a different light, as it had since the days of our childhood. Yet all of this was part of an emotionally charged, heart-wrenching story that begged for a new language to convey its essence. In pursuit of this language, I journeyed through the diverse lands of our world, delving into the histories and engaging with the people who had faced extraordinary adversity and pain throughout the past centuries. I explored the lives of the Moors in Muslim Spain, who braved unimaginable trials to safeguard their faith; the indigenous populations and African slaves in Columbus's New World, who were subjected to unspeakable horrors; the Jews in Nazi Germany's torture camps, and the harrowing tales of the Gulag Archipelago in Communist Russia. I sought a narrative style that could, to some extent, assist and enable me in expressing my personal anguish and our collective sense of deprivation. Throughout this years-long odyssey, a melancholic cloud hung persistently over me. During the tempestuous days of my youth, when each moment was shrouded in a veil of uncertainty, I found myself on the upper deck of a London bus, as fate guided my gaze to the beckoning lights of a Virgin Megastore. I thought to myself, maybe I could find something precious in there. While I didn't find an extensive collection of videos depicting sorrow and anguish, a revolutionary singer did manage to guide me to a radical bookshop. In this haven, there was an abundance of revolutionary literature, passionate speeches, and documentaries illustrating the atrocities committed against various nations and peoples. There were even feature films about the Holocaust readily available. In my quest for a new language, I delved into all these fascinating places, the kind that would make ordinary people's hair stand on end. Yet, despite my efforts, I never quite found the success I yearned for in discovering that elusive language.

The unsettling truth is, incidents like the Holocaust of the Jews, the soul-shattering dehumanization of black slaves, and the ruthless genocide of indigenous populations at the merciless hands of colonialists were all woven together by a sinister practice. For people, the awareness of these unspeakable atrocities was not entirely beyond reach. Yet, in the liberated lands of India, the true depth of understanding and empathy for the tribulations faced by Muslims remained elusive, even to our most esteemed leaders. Their bodies were indeed free from the prison bars, but iron shackles had sprouted within their hearts and minds in such a manner that the realization of their own true worth and value had become an arduous endeavor. Outwardly, their feet were unchained, but in reality, they harbored an unsettling affection for their own fetters. They had withered into a helpless, impotent, and crushed minority, and they were steadfast in their resolve to preserve this delicate state of being. One day, I was sitting in the company of our compassionate late teacher, Waqar Hussain Sahib, who said: "The way torture is practiced here, the internal process of breaking and scattering, even the victims of this torment themselves are not aware of what is happening to them. Then how can others possibly be informed about this tragic event?"

In the blurred memories of childhood, the existence of some characters remained an enigma for a long time. No one could fathom his true identity; they simply called him "The Professor." An enigmatic figure, he was cloaked in black attire, with a velvet cap perched upon his head, a mesmerizing rosary of white pearls nestled in his hand, and a glistening golden chain dangling from the pocket of his mysterious pocket watch. He clung to a small diary, scribbling in it almost compulsively as if attempting to capture the very essence of his cryptic existence.

The Professor was a man without a home, a family, or any traceable roots. He drifted through life like a ghost, leaving those who encountered him to wonder where he had come from and where he

might be destined to disappear next. His movements were imbued with a carefree elegance as if he were detached from the mundane world. He was a man of few words, lost in deep contemplation, only to pen his enigmatic thoughts within the pages of his diary. People weaved stories and theories about him, some painting him as a madcap eccentric, a vagabond adrift on the tides of lunacy, while others speculated that his psyche had been bruised by the crushing weight of knowledge and wisdom he carried within. Amidst casual chatter, he'd remark: "*afkhan khafi makhool ast*." Entranced by the fervor of his musings, he'd recite verses dedicated to the enigmatic cosmos. And when inspiration seemed to wane, he'd effortlessly summon paragraphs from missives penned in English to King George V, as if they were etched into the very fabric of his soul. It was much later that it was discovered that the Professor was the pride and joy of a distinguished family. Having achieved higher education, he had just begun his professional life at a prestigious university in Lahore when the traumatic event of partition occurred. After years of struggle, he was eventually drawn back to India by the allure of his homeland. But the trials he endured in his new life shattered his spirit from within. Now, he roamed the world immersed in a state of enchantment. In the free India, there was nothing left for him. Every couple of days, he would grace our home with his presence, announcing his own invitation in his inimitable manner. This unique ritual wasn't confined to our abode alone; it was his signature approach to attending dinners across the neighborhood. One evening, after a satisfying meal, he seemed to radiate contentment as he hummed a Persian verse. Seizing the moment, I inquired: "What is it that you're always jotting down in your notebook?"

He responded, "Don't you know? I'm a habitual letter-writer, penning small messages." Curious, I asked, "To whom do you write these countless letters?" With a subtle smile, he produced several petite envelopes from his pocket, inscribed with the words, "To the Future."

I pressed on, "But the future isn't a person. Who will the postman deliver these letters to?"

Hearing my words, his expression shifted abruptly, as if struck by a devastating revelation. The familiar shroud of melancholy and despair enveloped him once more, and he retreated into the recesses of his faraway thoughts.

Each time the professor appeared, he brought with him tidings of a novel prophecy or a fresh hope. Occasionally, he'd say, "A summons emanates from the Green Dome; soon, the believers shall taste victory." Other times, he'd assert, "The Ark of the Covenant is on the verge of being discovered by the people of Judah; we stand at the precipice of a grand battle." And sometimes, he would declare, "The Psalms of David have migrated to the West; nothing remains in the East." The listeners would whisper amongst themselves, "It appears the professor has dreamt anew today," but he, unfazed by their murmurs, would persist in his fervent writing. One day, stealing a peek at his notebook, I found the same two words written over and over: "*Khalm Makhul, Khalm Makhul, Khalm Makhul...*"

The professor's enigmatic black coat held a peculiar charm for us children as if it were a cryptic artifact waiting to be deciphered. This seemingly ordinary coat contained a labyrinth of pockets, each one a gateway to a different realm. It was as if the professor carried the universe with him, bundled up in the folds of his coat.

During the sweltering heat of summer, he would drape it over his shoulders, the fabric cascading around him like a protective veil. In the midst of social gatherings and shared meals, the coat remained by his side, ever vigilant. Yet, when the time came to take his leave, the professor would be seized by an inexplicable panic, exclaiming in despair, "Oh, where has my coat gone?" despite the fact that it remained loyally by his side, unacknowledged.

On occasion, the professor would be found limping, as if one of his legs had betrayed him, even though both remained perfectly healthy. His conversations would become a chaotic symphony, a cacophony of voices swirling around him as if he were addressing an unseen audience. At times, the professor would suddenly rise, announcing, "Come on, I'll go with you," even though no companion accompanied him.

We children delighted in these quirks, finding amusement in the peculiarities that defined the professor. The more serious-minded among the adults regarded him as an eccentric, a man lost in the depths of his own mind. One day, I asked my father why the professor behaved so strangely. He responded with a melancholic sigh, "My child, the professor has been shaped by the cruel hand of fate. He has navigated through turbulent rivers of fire and blood, unable to find solace in his journey of suffering. Not everyone possesses the fortitude to endure such relentless heartache. Within him lies a deep, hidden wound, and his restless soul cannot find peace. May Allah grant him grace and keep others from such harrowing trials."

In my childhood memories, Professor was just one of many eccentric characters who struggled to keep themselves afloat amid life's tumultuous waves. A motley crew of mystics and madmen gathered around my father, drawn by his compassion and care.

Enter Botal Mian, a man who claimed to be 104 years old. Age had bent his waist like a bow, and he hobbled along with the help of a cane. His voice was filled with a fiery passion, the zeal for Jihad, and he pursued lawful sustenance with restless determination.

Despite his age, Botal Mian set up a stall of books in front of the mosque, eking out a living through sheer grit. His endeavors were twofold: earning a living and spreading his missionary message. He was a paragon of honesty, compassionate to the young, and more generous than most. However, mention the white onion to him and

you'd hit a nerve. His fists would clench and his demeanor would shift in an instant.

One fateful day, I naively asked, "Grandfather, do you have a white onion?" The chaos that followed was like unleashing a storm. I had never seen such a kind and compassionate elder change so dramatically. Tears welled up in my eyes. Later, I discovered that Botal Mian had been part of the Khilafat Movement, having devoted everything to the cause led by Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali.

The struggle became an intrinsic part of his identity, shaping his actions even now, as he raised his cane and shouted slogans, as if fresh from a Khilafat rally. Time passed, circumstances changed, the Khilafat was abolished, and the country was divided. Yet Botal Mian's fervor remained undimmed. If someone were to mention his bent back and mock his pride by invoking the white onion, he would consider it an affront to his faith.

In a world filled with uncertainty and chaos, I encountered the enigmatic Munshi Ayub, a man who hailed from some southern corner of India. He was a lone wanderer, who found solace in our neighborhood, where he settled for business affairs. This solitary soul made a home in a grand, empty house - a hollow monument to his own isolation.

His voice, like a ghostly whisper, still lingers in my ears, reciting verses about death with a haunting passion. It was his raison d'être, the seductive muse that danced around him, making death seem like a vibrant, colorful alternative to the drudgery of life. At the time, I couldn't fathom why Munshi Ayub was so enamored with the specter of mortality, but as the layers of his life's story unraveled, I discovered his youthful escapade to Pakistan in search of an Islamic utopia.

Fate, however, had other plans. The train that carried him toward his dream was marred by tragedy, leaving only a few survivors - Munshi

Ayub among them. It was a near-death experience, both figuratively and literally, as he lay in a coma for days, assumed to be among the lifeless. When consciousness finally found him, it was as if he had awoken in an entirely different world. Disillusioned, he left Pakistan and returned to India, carrying the weight of his harrowing journey.

In his more reflective moments, Munshi Ayub would recount his brush with the afterlife with an intensity that could captivate even the most skeptical of listeners. "Death," he would say, "is not the great terror we perceive it to be. It's but a threshold, a gateway into the vast expanse of eternity. Picture a long, winding tunnel, with nothing but pure light at the end. Spirits and angels eagerly await your arrival, arms outstretched in welcome. Once you cross the threshold, you become weightless, floating through the ether, unburdened by the sorrows and anguish of the world you left behind."

He continued, "An indescribable joy envelops you, and as you traverse the tunnel, the trivialities of your past life wither away, like the last vestiges of a long-forgotten dream. The euphoria of everlasting freedom is an experience that transcends human understanding." In his words, one could almost taste the bittersweet allure of death, a paradox that entwined the beauty and tragedy of our existence.

In those days, books like "The Jolt of Hell" and "The Shock of Death" haunted their readers with the terror of mortality. But Munshi Ayub's mesmerizing words offered a strange reprieve, dissolving the dread of death as people attended his gatherings. As I reflect, I wonder how such a talent could emerge in an otherwise unremarkable merchant. He breathed life into despairing souls and altered the perspectives of those blindly pursuing wealth and power, transfiguring their hearts and minds. His bewitching eloquence often rendered him the center of attention at social events.

Despite this, his rivalry with Dr Stephen, a prominent trader of English medicines in the city, endured. Dr Stephen was perpetually

garbed in a suit, boots, and tie, ever clutching an English newspaper or magazine. Beneath this polished facade, he too concealed a wounded heart, hidden within his adoption of a Western lifestyle. Even in the scorching heat of June, his suit and tie betrayed no signs of discomfort as he disembarked from a rickshaw.

In that era, bicycles represented a symbol of status. One of his acquaintances, known colloquially as "Kala Sahib," walked alongside his bicycle dressed in a suit, unable to ride it, using it to augment his personal stature. These incidents seemed peculiar at the time, but when considered through the lens of India's partition, they evoke the inescapable anguish and stark realizations of that period.

In the name of freedom, the largest mass migration in human history transpired. Approximately fifteen million people were wrenched from their roots; nearly a million fell victim to murder and looting. The fire of hatred blazed fiercely, smoldering in various forms in the days to come. The ordinary individual, made of flesh and blood, could scarcely withstand such atrocity. Some turned to mysticism, others sought refuge in Sufism, some remained entrapped in the desire for the pleasures of death, and still, others veiled their wounds in the guise of a Western lifestyle.

A dark cloud of despair and suffering settled upon the Indian Muslims, swallowing even the sturdiest of hearts in its gloom. Still grappling with the haunting consequences of Delhi's collapse in 1857, they were struck by the shattering dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924. Stretching beyond their means, the Indian Muslims endeavored to save the Caliphate, but their efforts bore only the bitter fruits of disillusionment and desolation. The partition of India had hacked away at their roots, scattering their collective strength and diminishing their numbers. It seemed as though generations of Indian Muslims had been ensnared in a relentless tempest of civilizational and

intellectual disarray. Scarce was a family untouched by the enigmatic presence of a Sufi, a mystic, or a madman.

Our family, too, found itself engulfed in the ceaseless storm of strife. My late grandfather was tormented by the decision of how to raise his children, teetering between shaping them into barristers and nurturing them as devout clerics. Unable to withstand the tumult, my elder uncle sought sanctuary in Jamia Millia Islamia for his education. Yet the path remained shrouded in shadows. This harrowing state of affairs cast a heavy pall over my grandfather's heart and mind, unsettling his mental balance. In our esteemed family, steeped in the traditions of Eastern wisdom and piety, history and culture were revered. Uncle Ilyas channeled his entire being into exploring the Islamic epoch in India, particularly in Bihar. His writings—crafted in pristine, beautiful prose—often ignited fervent debates within our family.

These discussions took on a new intensity whenever our distant aunt came to visit every month or two. Her days and nights were infused with an ethereal spirituality, as she immersed herself in prayers and recitations from the break of dawn to twilight. *Hizbul A'zam*, time-tested remedies of the ancients, and innumerable other sacred texts were her constant companions. Some books were adorned with various talismans and intricate patterns, outlining methods to vanquish enemies or revealing the most auspicious moments for prayer. She had authored volumes on these arcane subjects, her writings weaving an intricate tapestry of otherworldly mysticism.

Amidst the city's chaos, a Hindu-Muslim unrest emerged. We found ourselves in a neighborhood where Muslims were scarce, and Hindus abundant. Fear gripped the hearts of the common Muslims, urging us to flee immediately to areas dominated by our brethren. The situation weighed heavily, yet my father remained steadfast, refusing to budge, as he believed it would shatter our morale.

In this precarious atmosphere, my aunt's peculiar tranquility was a beacon. She reassured us, insisting that all would be well, while her own devotion intensified. Her influence led to my youthful fascination with mystical tomes like *Nafayul Khalaeq* and *Naqsh Sulaimani*. Our collection boasted beautiful, leather-bound volumes of such enigmatic works. It was common for various books and pamphlets to be combined into a single, hefty volume, so as I leafed through *Qasida Burda*, I stumbled upon the tale of Yusuf and Zulaikha. Witnessing my intrigue with these esoteric writings, my father chided me one day: "What is all this that you keep reading?" But he did not forbid me, simply concluding with "Well, alright then!"

My father embodied a spiritual intellect, wisdom seeping through his pores, while my aunt safeguarded the traditions passed down by our esteemed family elder, Syed Basharat Karim. The region hummed with whispers of Basharat Karim's miraculous feats and supernatural occurrences. People revered the soil from his grave as a source of healing. Within this interplay of intellect and tradition, a struggle persisted, but it never erupted into conflict.

In the corner of the city where we resided, there was a small bookshop that drew an eclectic crowd of intellectuals and dreamers. Among the regulars was a mathematics professor from the local college, who seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. Our conversations often centered around the pressing issues of our nation and community. His moods would oscillate between a fierce determination to effect change and a sense of crippling despair that clouded his eyes with unshed tears.

My father, a pillar of strength and wisdom, would do his best to console the professor, offering words of encouragement and hope. As the cycle of optimism and disillusionment continued, we would occasionally be joined by an elderly man adorned in a Turkish hat and black achkan. A revered figure within the Shia community, his poetry

collection, Shola-e-Nida, had earned him a place in the pantheon of celebrated poets.

In time, he would ascend to the position of pro-vice-chancellor at a prestigious university, yet behind the facade of his accomplishments, he too grappled with hidden anguish. Although he seldom revealed his true emotions, when he did choose to share his thoughts, his words flowed with the force of a cascading waterfall. In those rare moments, it felt as though the heat of crumbling buildings and scorching sun had reached deep into our very souls, leaving an indelible impression on all who listened.

In the flurry of the morning, a certain gentleman would often rap at our door, whisking my father away for their habitual morning walk. Occasionally, I would join them. There was an air of steadfastness and ambition that seemed to emanate from this man. He was incessantly scheming and deliberating on ways to advance the education and welfare of the Muslim community. Those early morning dialogues were replete with such subjects. At the time, the gravity of those conversations eluded me. Later, I discovered that he held prominent positions in various community organizations, eventually ascending to the presidency of the All India Jamiat Ahle Hadith.

This celestial gathering of wounded spirits that my father had convened around him appeared to embody an enduring discourse of determination. In the days preceding winter's arrival, when memory boxes were retrieved and the possessions of dear ones who had departed for Pakistan were aired out under the sun's rays, we would cleanse and stow my uncle's achkan, my sisters' gharara, and my aunt's gilded jewelry box. It was in those moments that my father's sorrow would inevitably bubble up, as he contemplated whether Jilani Bhai would ever return. My mother would provide solace, reassuring him that even if Jilani Bhai did not return to stay, he would surely come back for a visit and to collect his belongings. These treasure chests of

entrusted possessions would be locked away until the next monsoon season, yet the faint fragrance of cherished ones would rejuvenate our wounds with each passing year.

In Abba's existence, the interplay between reason and intuition played a significant role, shaping his decisions through a delicate dance of intellect and conscience. It wasn't as if they were adversaries; rather, they harmoniously intertwined, complementing one another like intricate brushstrokes on the canvas of life.

One night, a dream visited Abba, leaving behind its ethereal whisper. As morning's light broke, preparations for a journey to the village commenced. The train, a mechanical beast in those days, was considered a perilous companion, particularly when accompanied by the laughter and innocence of children. The reason for this sudden pilgrimage to the village remained shrouded in mystery; Abba's lips were sealed, and the mother was similarly evasive.

As the train pulled into the next station, a messenger emerged from the village's embrace, bearing news of a death in the family. The departed soul had requested Abba to lead their funeral prayer, a sacred responsibility. The age of mobile phones and the internet was but a distant dream and those attuned to the subtleties of life navigated its currents through signs and whispers.

The train eventually reached its destination, delivering its passengers into the awaiting arms of a waiting bullock cart, its makeshift tent of bamboo mats a humble offering of comfort. This journey held a certain enchantment for us children, the world unfolding around us in an endless parade of fields, meadows, and orchards. Abba, however, chose to walk, his footfalls echoing the belief that men were not meant to indulge in such luxuries. The bullock cart was a sanctuary reserved for women and children.

Upon our arrival, the landscape of home had transformed, the men's and women's quarters teeming with life, the air heavy with grief. A body, draped in the embrace of a white shroud, lay in one corner of the courtyard, visitors paying their respects in a somber procession. It was the funeral of the one we affectionately called "Mother." In truth, she was our relation's grandmother, a woman who had no children of her own and who had poured her love onto us like a waterfall, treating us as her own flesh and blood.

I had never imagined I would see Mother like this on our journey to the village, and I struggled to grasp the reason for the melancholy that pervaded the air, the tears that flowed, and the anger at Mother for leaving us alone. In the gatherings of Munshi Ayub, I had learned that Mother was now ensconced in a world of heavenly delights, surrounded by divine light, commanding angels, and receiving a celestial welcome. It seemed impossible that she would forget us children amid the flurry of celestial servants. This was not the Mother I knew.

As I stood there, someone gestured towards me, noting my tearless gaze. An elderly woman offered her interpretation, "He's just a child; what does he know about death?" But my anger stemmed from Mother's departure to that luminous world, leaving us behind. It felt selfish, and I never expected such a choice from my (grand) Mother.

For several days, the air was filled with the hum of beloved relatives and friends, and the stream of condolences continued to flow. Then, as life gradually began to regain its usual rhythm, we realized that we'd have to stay in the village for a while. On one side, I was grieving the absence of my father's majlis, a kind of drawing room where men would gather and converse, and on the other, I was confronted with the stark reality of village life. Yet, soon enough, I found myself attending the madrasa alongside my peers and other children from the family.

At first, no one paid much mind, and I reveled in the freedom. I would return home from the madrasa whenever the mood struck. But one day, an admission test transpired, and a quandary arose for the teachers: which class should I join? I could read and comprehend Urdu textbooks, stories, and tales with ease. I managed to read books from the first, second, third, and fourth grades, but when it came to writing dictation, I wrote each letter individually. Mathematics and other subjects remained elusive, even at the first-grade level. Opinions on my placement varied: some suggested the second grade, while others contended that, given my proficiency in prose and poetry from the fourth grade, the first grade seemed a better fit, despite my struggles with math. I exploited this confusion to my advantage for a few days, forming connections with students from various grades.

Then one day, my mother lit a fire using wasted food grains, illuminating a new wooden tablet she handed me on my way to the madrasa. Perhaps this symbolized my official admission. I found satisfaction in writing on the tablet, illuminated by the rice light, and then wiping it clean on the grass. The experience felt particularly delightful when the children playfully raced, rubbing their tablets against the grass together. I anticipated that my companion, Asim, would be thrilled to see my new tablet, which I'd occasionally race against his. But instead of expressing joy, he whispered to me: "You know, the end is drawing near. Hard times are approaching for Muslims. My mother said that the Al-Aqsa Mosque has been set ablaze, and now something terrible is about to happen." Initially, I didn't grasp the full extent of the situation, but after hearing the children's anxious discussions about the Al-Aqsa Mosque for days, I sought my mother's insight. The politics of Israel and the Middle East remained largely indecipherable to me, yet the undercurrent of anxiety in the children's conversations steadily intensified. It wasn't long before impassioned speeches echoed through the village mosque, and

the students' gatherings became fertile ground for devising imaginary plans to confront the Jews.

This madrasa, with *Darsgah Islami Kumhrauli* inscribed on its sign, nestled right beside our home. Encircling the madrasa, open fields sprawled, and about a hundred and fifty yards away, perched slightly above the ground, the village mosque resided, enveloped by the resting places of our family's ancestors, and on the other side, the essential item shops. Both the mosque and the madrasa served as the village's beating heart.

Amid the madrasa's flourishing lawn, children joyfully played and took part in various activities, their laughter and liveliness permeating the air. Simultaneously, the vicinity of the mosque hummed with spirited gatherings of elders. However, when the Aqsa Mosque arson incident unfolded, a wave of unease and concern rippled through both the young and old, casting a shadow over their once-peaceful atmosphere.

During this turbulent period, an issue of *Tajalli* likely featured Maulana Maududi's in-depth article about the Al-Aqsa Mosque incident. When my father returned to the village at the week's end, he carried this issue with him. Spirited discussions unfolded among the elders. In the men's assembly, debates swirled around the question of why God allowed Muslims to suffer humiliation at the hands of the Jews, a people considered forsaken by God and bearing His wrath. Were Muslims now devoid of God's compassionate hand?

At the time, the piercing nature of these questions remained elusive. Yet now, as I ponder it all, I recognize the immense upheaval the Al-Aqsa incident provoked within the theological contemplations of the Muslims from that era.

2
One More Sin

Village life, an unending adventure, would sweep us up in its charm. With the older boys, we'd play hide-and-seek, get lost in the sugarcane fields, hunt birds and fish, or explore lush gardens and savor the fruits of the season. The doors of every home stood open to the children, welcoming us to share in the bounty of the fruit-bearing trees. Many households had the custom of reading newspapers and periodicals, among them the popular Monthly Maulvi, Monthly *Makhzan*, and Monthly *Nigar*. Preserved in most homes, these magazines held fascination for the young and the old alike.

One day, a story in *Makhzan* struck me, its memory still vivid after all these years. It centered around a proverb, "Ain hum barsar-e-alam," and told of a Moulvi preaching against theft. He spoke of a tailor, proud of his skill in saving fabric, not realizing that on the Day of Judgment, his flag of identity (alam) would bear the weight of all the stolen scraps he'd taken. The tailor, present during the sermon, was deeply affected, vowing to abstain from such acts.

As days turned into weeks, the tailor remained true to his word. But one day, temptation arrived in the form of a beautiful piece of fabric. Overwhelmed, he touched it, put it away, but couldn't shake the thought of taking it for himself. His conscience, however, would remind him of the flag of the afterlife, laden with the colorful scraps of his thievery, and he would resist the urge.

Days passed, the customer's arrival drew near, and the tailor wavered. Overcome with the desire to showcase his artistry, he uttered, "Ain hum barsar-e-alam," meaning one more piece on the flag with so many clothes hanging on it – a symbol of his conflicted soul, weighed down by the delicate balance between temptation and redemption.

A less common Urdu proverb, "Rou mein rawa hai," translates to "let it flow, it's allowed." The anecdote that inspired this adage unfolds as follows: In a small neighborhood, a religious scholar, also known as a Maulvi, lived adjacent to a neighbor who raised chickens. These chickens frequently trespassed into the scholar's home, causing havoc in the courtyard and feasting on his stored grain. The Maulvi would go about his day, trying not to let the chickens bother him too much. However, his wife could not stand the constant presence and mess of the chickens.

One fateful day, in a fit of anger, she caught and slaughtered one of the neighbor's chickens. She buried the feathers meticulously in the courtyard and proceeded to cook the chicken. As the chicken cooked, she thought to herself, "These chickens have been tormenting me daily, and now it's their turn to be cooked."

When the Maulvi returned home that evening, he noticed the aroma of meat and inquired about the dish his wife had prepared. She admitted to slaughtering one of the neighbor's chickens, pushed to the brink by their persistent annoyance. The Maulvi, taken aback, rebuked her, "O servant of God, what have you done? This is completely forbidden. I cannot partake in this unlawful meal." His wife retorted, "Your ruling seems peculiar. These chickens have already consumed our grain and brought filth into our home. How does slaughtering one make it forbidden? Regardless, if you refuse to eat the meat, I'll prepare garlic and chili for you instead."

Upon hearing this, the religious scholar hesitated, eventually conceding, "O servant of God, we will leave the meat untouched. However, our water and spices were used, and we've expended fuel to cook it, so we shall drink the soup." As his wife began pouring the soup into a bowl, a few pieces of chicken slipped in. She tried to prevent them from falling in with a spoon, but the Maulvi intervened, "O servant of God, don't bother with the spoon. Let whatever comes,

come; 'Rou mein rawa hai'." At that moment, his wife couldn't help but laugh.

In a world where individuals from all walks of life, ranging from the humble tailor to the erudite religious scholar, find themselves consumed by materialism and entangled in the contradictions between thought and action, it's hardly surprising that an overwhelming sense of despair and disconnection from the divine emerges. The spiritual lives of the faithful appear to have veered off course, leaving them bereft of any connection to God's compassionate touch. In this bleak landscape, a pervasive sense of deprivation becomes the inescapable fate for many.

Every year, as the spirit of Eid-ul-Adha embraces the village, it becomes a tapestry of community and celebration. The madrasa's courtyard comes alive with large pots of food simmering in anticipation, and an atmosphere of jubilation envelops everyone. Rich and poor, old and young, men and women converge in a shared experience of togetherness. For the children, it's an adventure in amusement and leisure, while the elders, under the soft glow of lanterns, delve into impassioned conversations about the madrasa's educational landscape, the village's welfare, and the challenges faced by the Muslim community.

This year, however, the gathering took place with a palpable absence of joy. The air was heavy with a melancholic haze and a lingering sadness, born from the devastating events at Al-Aqsa Mosque. The celebration's heartbeat seemed to falter, leaving behind an unspoken sense of mourning.

Each year, the madrasa's annual gathering was a highly anticipated event, a tapestry woven from the threads of tradition, community, and spirituality. Elderly women, who had seen countless gatherings in their time, eagerly awaited the celebration, as if expecting some long-lost friend. The entire village felt a sense of belonging, a connection that transcended the mundane and reached for something higher.

In the madrasa courtyard, chairs and mats were placed for the villagers, while a makeshift barrier of cots created a separate space for women to observe the event. Behind this partition, the women found joy in watching their children and grandchildren showcase their talents, a testament to the seeds of knowledge they had sown. The madrasa served as an anchor, connecting the village with a shared sense of purpose and spirituality.

From behind the cot barrier, the women had a unique vantage point, allowing them to experience the event in a way that was entirely their own. While the men were expected to maintain a certain level of decorum and dignity in their seating arrangement, the women's area was alive with the delightful chaos of children's laughter and playful banter, infusing the evening with an air of celebration.

As speeches gave way to theatrical recitals, the atmosphere in the madrasa courtyard grew electric. One student, clad in a Turkish hat and black robe, embodied the spirit of the renowned poet Nazir Akbarabadi. As he began to sing in the mesmerizing style of qawwals, the audience found themselves spellbound, drawn into a world where words danced with melody and the barriers between the sacred and the profane seemed to blur, if only for a moment.

As the singer continued, urging listeners to let go of their desires and worldly attachments, he spoke of how death's thief, constantly plundering day and night, would render all efforts futile:

> When the bandit of death in your path does appear,
> Wealth, progeny, family – none can interfere.
> Pomp and show, behind they'll stay,
> As a nomad, you'll leave, on that fateful day.[i]

As these lines were sung, I could see many elderly women's eyes well up with tears, moved by the profound reminder of life's impermanence:

> Through life's journey, all you hold dear departs,

Not even a cow will graze upon your grave's parts.
The possessions amassed, divided 'mongst your heirs,
Daughters and daughters-in-law, for you, no place they'll prepare.

Pomp and show, in time, will fade and decline,
Left far behind as you reach the end of life's line.[ii]

In the face of such a poignant message, the audience was reminded of the ephemeral nature of life and the importance of focusing on what truly matters beyond material possessions and worldly accomplishments.

With the portrayal of the revered poet, a group of students seamlessly weaved their essence into the grand finale, creating an atmosphere that felt as if the symphony of departure had already begun, with the angel Israfil's trumpet just a heartbeat away. A young noble, adorned with the guise and aura of a renowned poet from a thriving metropolis, emerged as a vivid impersonation. His voice was infused with the fire of emotion, captivating the listeners as he recited the verses:

In dreams we seek, a yearning deep, O kindred soul,
Desire and sorrow, intertwined, play their role.[iii]

In the midst of the swirling atmosphere, an enigmatic hush descended, weaving its way through the air like an invisible cloak, enveloping all within its enshrouding embrace, leaving only a haunting sense of stillness in its wake.

Embrace the parting pure, in closeness we confide,

Restless we've grown, in the ache of absence, sighs reside.[iv]

It seemed as if this was not the poet's personal pain, but rather a commentary on our collective situation. And particularly, this verse conveyed:

Of myriad souls who wander far and wide,

Merely a handful at their journey's end reside.[v]

It felt as if the painful memories of our national journey's failures had been refreshed once again.

The school's annual gathering, ostensibly a celebration of communal exuberance, was often tinged with a somber undertone due to the choice of themes, recitation of melancholic verses, and arrangement of thought-provoking subjects. Perhaps it was the inextricable connection between religious existence and the allegories of worldly impoverishment and destruction that sorrow had come to permeate not only our collective psyche and national identity, but had also acquired the stature of a deeply-rooted religious emblem. Indeed, there is a certain poignancy in the manner that fate has consigned this nation to the whims of circumstance, as evidenced by the oft-repeated lament of the elderly in their supplications: "Why does my turn take such an eternity to arrive?"

In the village, there was a sense of abundance and affluence that enveloped its inhabitants. People possessed more than they required, with goods and food items aplenty. They valued the exchanges and the act of sharing each other's pain and sorrow, creating an atmosphere of compassion and camaraderie. Education was widespread, and many ventured into cities like Calcutta and Bombay for trade, while others found their homes in faraway lands like Europe and America.

Amidst this prosperity, though, a profound emptiness lurked beneath the surface. Whenever my paternal uncle returned from the city, a gathering would be held in the school courtyard. There, he would passionately lay out his plans to transform the village into an idyllic haven. It was his efforts that had established the madrasa, which quickly set the village on a path towards progress and enlightenment.

The village madrasa doubled as a town hall, a place where, from time to time, esteemed guests would deliver captivating speeches. I recall a particular occasion when a distinguished scholar from Lucknow graced us with his presence, recounting the curious tale of a man named Denis, involved in the Al-Aqsa Mosque incident.

The story unfolded in a way that left us puzzled, as we tried to grasp why Denis, if indeed mentally troubled, would ignite a fire within the Al-Aqsa Mosque. How could this destruction be linked to the advent of Jesus? But what truly piqued our interest and left us astonished were the accounts of the phantom voices that whispered to Denis. These voices told him he was Jewish and selected for a crucial role preceding the arrival of the Messiah. At times, Denis felt a divine connection, as if God were speaking to him in the same manner He did with Prophet Moses. He maintained that the instruction to set the fire was a command from God, which he executed, deeming it a celestial order.

As the gathering drew to a close, and the scholar paid a visit to our home, I found myself pondering whether the enigmatic and portentous voices our professor often heard were also entwined in this divine vortex. The professor even claimed to receive signs, basing many of his invitations on these mysterious indications. I longed to inquire about the proper way to discern and interpret these ethereal voices and signals. However, the throngs of people and the elders' unceasing conversations left me bereft of the opportunity to seek answers to my questions.

In the village, there was a mausoleum connected to the mosque, belonging to Mangal Shah. Yet, this place had no flickering lamps or the soothing aroma of incense. A melancholy air of desolation had taken hold, reflecting the deep yearning for something lost.

During those times, people often sought solace in pledging allegiance to a spiritually enlightened person. Turning to Sufism was seen as a widely accepted remedy for the psychological wounds that had been inflicted upon Muslim hearts and minds by the relentless series of unfortunate events. However, the tragedy lay in the fact that the elder's ideal village project didn't just cast a shadow over Mangal Shah's mausoleum, but it also diminished the influence of those spiritually inclined individuals and the chain of allegiance they fostered.

The establishment of this ideal village, in the wake of the caliphate's fall, was an attempt to fill a void, the intensity of which may have been

underestimated by many. Wounded hearts and minds sought refuge in the past, finding solace in the memories of better days, and in the tales of the grandeur of their elders. One day, my older brother, Najib Akhtar, whom we affectionately called Bhai Jan, brought an old, weathered copy of *Aina-e-Tirhut*. As we were flipping through the pages of the book, our father happened upon us and inquired about the tome. I explained that it was *Aina-e-Tirhut*, a book rumored to contain accounts of our ancestors, a memoir of our family, replete with detailed genealogies.

Upon hearing this, a wistful smile momentarily graced his face. He said, "My son, what importance do these stories hold now? Look at what you have become. There's little to gain from knowing that our ancestors were once great.

As the week drew to a close, father's return would usher in a remarkable surge of energy and activity within the men's quarters. However, following the harrowing arson at the revered Al-Aqsa Mosque, the men's quarters assumed the role of a communal hub for the village, where the mysteries and ramifications of this dreadful event were fervently discussed. Conversations would meander from the gritty details of the Great War to the heartrending lamentations aimed at the reckless Turks who had torn apart the very fabric of the caliphate.

It appeared as though an unrelenting procession of suffering and anguish would eventually consume our very essence. In the midst of this disheartening ambiance, disquieting news trickled in from the country's interior. Initially, I struggled to comprehend how the systematic assaults on the Muslim population, mosques, shrines, and Muslim-owned properties in Ahmedabad, orchestrated by the Hindu revivalists, could possibly impact us. Yet, as the chain of perturbing reports lengthened, the core of our being trembled with mounting dread.

"Mahboob, my dear! The turmoil in Ahmedabad ain't just a simple Hindu-Muslim clash, no sir! It's a carefully crafted plan to tear down our very core. You heard that Balraj Madhok fella, right? He went on

and on about how us Muslims need to be Indianized," Abba said, worry etched on his face.

Well, what more could we expect from folks with such narrow minds?

"They're out for blood, tryin' to get back at us for Pakistan bein' created. They think we're sworn to Pakistan for all eternity. But for us, borders don't mean a thing, and Islam ain't got no room for the idea of a nation-state. For us, every bit of land is 'our home, our God's land,'" Abdul Ahad Sahab chimed in.

Master Murtaza couldn't help but ask, "So, how did this whole mess of murder and theft start?"

"Now that's a tough one to pin down, but there's a whole heap of reasons. They're usin' the sacredness of the cow as an excuse to stir up anti-Muslim feelings all over. The main disagreement in Ahmedabad started over a cow, too. Word has it that after the fire at Al-Aqsa Mosque, Muslims held protest rallies all across the country, includin' Ahmedabad, where a whole lotta Muslims joined in. One of the slogans they shouted was 'Those who cross us will turn to dust.' That got the narrow-minded Hindus all riled up, givin' them a chance to say that Muslims are gettin' together and growin' strong again. Just four or five days after the rally, a Ram Lila procession went down, and a tale about a Muslim inspector desecratin' the Ramayana spread like wildfire. After that, all hell broke loose – the Hindu Dharam Raksha Committee popped up in a heartbeat. Thousands hit the streets to defend the Ramayana, and before we knew it, Muslim neighborhoods were up in flames, leadin' to the most terrifyin' chaos in independent India, all under the watchful eye of the government."

"Look here, the Hindu mind's always huntin' for symbols. It's downright bothered that the Al-Aqsa incident brings Muslims together. Muslims see themselves as a worldwide family, a global Ummah. But the Hindus ain't got nothin' like that to unite 'em. Now take the Ramayana, they tried to give it the same sorta importance as the Quran. You might've heard, just a few days back, a bag of books fell durin' a police raid at ol' Pirbukhari Sahab's weddin'. When the Muslims found out there was a Quran in that bag, well, they were

hotter than a hornet. In no time, a crowd of four or five thousand folks gathered, and the police had no choice but to apologize and make amends. The Hindu mind wants the same thing with the Ramayana, but it knows deep down that the racial prejudice stuffed in those religious boundaries just ain't gonna cut it for a universal symbol."

Master Murtaza inquired, "What, pray tell, is their secret recipe for uniting their community?"

He expounded, "It's naught but placing Muslim enmity and conjuring up imaginary foes in Pakistan at the center of their discourse. Have you not lent an ear to Golwalkar's recent address in Ahmedabad? Mere months ago, he spoke of constitutional safeguards and specific legislation for the Muslim minority in India, yet no utterance was made regarding protections for Hindus. Golwalkar believes that the only sanctuary for Hindus lies within a Hindu nation. I cannot help but surmise that the days ahead will see a burgeoning in this undercurrent of Muslim hostility." Father, thusly, descended into deep thought.

In such a predicament, what avenues might Muslims find themselves left with? Abdul Ahad gazed at Mehboob Alam, his eyes brimming with inquiry. However, ere Mehboob could utter a word, Master Murtaza interposed. He exclaimed, "A mere year past, at the Jamiat Ulema conference in Ahmedabad, Asad Madani delivered a scathing rebuke of Jana Sangh and the RSS. He ascribed the Meerut unrest to their machinations, and given their sway within the Congress, do you not surmise that the government shall prevent the fruition of such extremist stratagems?"

"Dearest, you do astound me. Can the Jamiat Ulema truly be so guileless that they yet cling to the expectation of benevolence from the Congress government? In Gujarat, from the upper echelons to the lowly ranks, encompassing police officers, politicians, and even those wielding power at the center—all of them are but members of Congress. The corpses of Muslims, heaped upon lorries for communal interment, are not descending from the firmament. I must wonder why this charade betwixt Sanghis and Congressfolk evades the comprehension of the Jamiat Ulema's clergy." Abdul Ahad, hitherto

submerged in profound contemplation, uttered these words with a tinge of vexation.

"Hafiz Sahab, so long as these sorts of clergy align themselves with Congress, a novel sunrise shall remain ever elusive for the Muslim populace of our nation," Mehboob Alam's timbre bore a distinct air of despondency.

He expounded, "Our spiritual leaders find themselves ensnared in a quandary. They readily inveigh against the Sanghis who are beyond the government's confines, yet their tongues fall silent when addressing the animus directed at Muslims by Congressi Sanghis from within the government. Contrarily, these Jamiat Ulema clerics orchestrate electoral crusades in support of such malefactors. May the Almighty divest them of their ocular blinders."

"It is this very phenomenon that represents the utmost calamity," Father articulated his distress. He proceeded, "Don't be misled by the facade of these seemingly clerical politicians, nor be beguiled by their prayers and fasts. In reality, they serve as the minions of the tyrannical Congress elite, ceaselessly striving to preserve this agonizing state of affairs within the Muslim community. Their allegiance to Congress shall remain unyielding, regardless of how dire the situation becomes. It's a peculiar and abhorrent enchantment. On one side, we face the insidious tendrils of the Sanghi mindset, and on the other, the methodical scheme of Muslim extermination by Sanghi Congressis. The cleric deems the former as the foe, and the latter as an ally. How utterly bewildering!"

> In faith and knowledge, once we thrived[vi],
> Now plundered by those who God's grace belied.

In a tone filled with emotion, Father recited the verse, sending a wave of disquietude washing over those present in the gathering.

"Yes, Hafiz Sahib, you're absolutely right," Mehmood said, his voice straining to break the palpable silence that enveloped the room. "The situation is gravely concerning. There's an alarming proliferation of extremist Hindu organizations. Just a few years back, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad emerged, and now I've heard whispers of a new group

in Mumbai called Shiv Sena, which has a singular aim: the annihilation of Muslims. And, most unsettling of all, is the Jana Sangh's ascension as a political force in recent elections. It seems the country's trajectory is shifting, and it's shifting rapidly."

"Yes, the ominous writing on the wall foreshadows that the days ahead will only grow more challenging. If only these Congress-aligned clerics could abandon their disingenuous attempts at soothing Muslims and lulling them into a false sense of security. Instead, they should be urging the community to prepare for the tough realities we're bound to confront," Abdul Ahad sighed, his voice tinged with a cold, poignant bitterness.

"It's simply bewildering how this savage rampage of bloodshed and devastation is painted with a religious gloss, as if it's a just battle. Amid these chilling and quivering incidents, there's a deafening silence from the influential Hindu leaders or their spiritual counterparts. It seems as if the collective consciousness of the Hindu community has tragically withered away," Abba expressed with a heavy heart.

"Yes, it's true! The reports coming from Ahmedabad seem to paint a picture so bleak, one can't help but feel that living among them might be a mockery of life itself. Innocent children were ruthlessly murdered before their mothers' eyes, daughters and daughters-in-law were violated in front of their family's elders, only to be slain with unrelenting savagery afterward. Whole populations vanished, and even the Muslim refugees who sought the police's protection met their end before they could reach the safety of the camps. The anguished cries and desperate pleas of innocent children fell on the deaf ears of these stone-hearted instigators," Mehboob Alam lamented, his voice heavy with sorrow.

Ah, indeed, you're right. When independence came, there was a certain level of chaos and frenzy that could have been deemed as a temporary loss of sanity. However, now, over two decades later, the situation has settled, and we can't just brush it off as mere madness. This is part of a deliberate, orchestrated scheme. Abdul Ahad shared his thoughts once more, saying, "There's one crucial aspect we need to comprehend. In the turmoil unfolding in Ahmedabad, mosques and

shrines have been purposefully singled out. The underlying intention seems to be the complete eradication of our cultural and religious identity from this nation."

They may not fathom that Islam, by its very nature, is imbued with a divine elasticity. As Murtaza Sahab was reciting his couplet, the ethereal call to Isha prayer echoed from the village mosque. Unbidden from my father's lips emerged: wallahi almusta'an meaning, 'Allah is the one whose help is sought'. And thus, the intimate gathering men's quarter dispersed like whispers in the wind.

In the warm afterglow of our evening meal, I unraveled my interpretation of the Ahmedabad riots before my mother, weaving a tapestry of conversation and innocent lives caught in the crossfire. I couldn't help but ask if the chaos would reach our village, threatening our very existence. My mother, a wellspring of love, enveloped me in her embrace, kissed my forehead, and whispered: "Child, may Allah enfold you in His protection; He is our guardian, and He will not abandon us to the shadows."

Her words, like a balm, soothed my troubled soul, but a lingering fear coiled within me. In the moonlit courtyard, where roses danced in the whispering breeze, I plucked a delicate bloom, its fragrance still brimming with life. The tender care of these gardens was entrusted to Mangla, who would shower me with petals, fruits plucked from the trees, and during the harvest season, his entire family would be swept up in a symphony of activity, providing a playground of wonder for us children. The village was a kaleidoscope of joy and celebration during those times. Though Mangla was Hindu by faith, he would listen to the call to prayer with a reverence that seemed to absorb every sacred word. He cherished us children and was an intrinsic part of our world. At times, an air of otherness would drift between us as he prepared his meals separately due to religious observance, but never did it occur to me that he was not woven into the very fabric of our family. As I sought to understand the complexities of the Ahmedabad riots and the heinous cruelties committed by Hindus, the issue remained enigmatic, an intricate knot defying unraveling.

3
The Aqsa Mosque

In the heart of a timeless village, a sacred site stood – the Ahila Asthan, a testament to the intricate tapestry of interwoven beliefs and legends. A mile and a half away, it bore witness to the footprints of Sita and the transformative power of Lord Rama's touch. There, the story of a woman turned to stone by a curse was unraveled, and her redemption through Rama's divine intervention. A pond nearby, shrouded in whispers of miraculous cures, drew the faithful and the hopeful.

This temple, exalted for its eggplants, was a magnet for pilgrims who offered them as tokens of reverence. I found myself there one afternoon, swept along with other children in the festive air of the annual fair, held during the auspicious time of Ram Navami. An ocean of people, eclectic shops, and the aroma of delicacies created an atmosphere of joyous celebration.

The temple priest, a woman – an enduring tradition for millennia – embodied the spirit of unity that permeated the event. Here, references from the ancient Ramayana and the myriad tales of old coalesced into a cultural epicenter that transcended mere worship.

As we stood near the temple, the priest approached, pressing sweets into our hands. We hesitated, unsure if it was right for us to partake in this offering. Returning home, we shared our story with the elders, sparking a debate on the permissibility of consuming the sweets.

This place, where people of all religions and backgrounds gathered in harmony, seemed to defy the rigid lines drawn by some who claimed to be Hindus yet sought to eradicate Muslims from the land. And as I pondered this conundrum, the answer, like a fleeting shadow, remained elusive.

Walking with my father on a morning stroll in Lahria Sarai, I was struck by the melodies of devotional songs emanating from the temple's loudspeakers. The temple's loudspeakers crooned devotional melodies, their tunes unfamiliar yet resonating with a profound sense

of joy. It was as if these enchanting hymns of praise spoke to our hearts in a language we could recognize.

Shri Radhe Gowinda, let your soul dance to the cherished name of Hari,

The tender cowherd, the name our hearts adore,

Young Nandlala, the name that sings to our souls.

Shri Radhe Gowinda, let your heart vibrate with the love of Hari's name,

Adorned with a peacock-feathered crown and a fragrant garland of blooms,

He wears a saffron tilak, a mark of his divine grace,

In Vrindavan's winding lanes, he weaves a spell of ecstasy,

Compelling everyone to dance, surrendering to his celestial rhythm.

Yes, he beckons each soul to dance,

Let your heart reverberate with Hari's treasured name,

Shri Radhe Gowinda.[vii]

As I beheld the reverence for trees and stones, a tangled bewilderment took hold, while at times, the sight of Kali's fiery tongue in the temple sent shivers of dread. Yet, glimpsing the women, soaked and wrapped in their devoted penance during Chhath, and the all-pervading hymns and songs of devotion, it became apparent that these unknown seekers were, in their own unique ways, questing for light. Despite their utterly dissimilar cultural bearings, these ordinary Hindus, clothed in flesh, radiated an undeniable sense of humanity. The morning tableau, wherein the neighborhood Brahmin, cradling a basket of blossoms, would pass our dwelling, intoning "Narayan, Narayan," would frequently dance before my eyes. Pausing briefly, he would exchange pleasantries and inquire after my father's health, bestow a smile, and proceed, his euphoric chant of "Narayan, Narayan" resounding through the air.

My thoughts swirled, considering that they, too, were Hindus, what then had transpired amongst their brethren in Ahmedabad, causing them to be a source of affliction for Muslims, seeking to oust them from their homeland?

One day, it occurred to me to consult Uncle Basheera on the matter, for he was a man possessed of worldly wisdom. Invariably, I found him engrossed in the pages of newspapers or deftly adjusting the radio's dial. Uncle Basheera seemed ever awash in an aura of detachment from the world and its trappings. When he would croon, "O Messenger of God, grant us refuge," in his heartrending voice at the Prophet's (PBUH) court, a curious rapture would seize those who listened. The eyes of elderly women would glisten with unshed tears.

O Messenger of God, grant us refuge, lest our pearls of tears scatter and fall,

If your grace does not come, we shall surely perish, after all.

This world's sorrows, these thousands of cruelties we withstand,

O Prophet, if you don't support us, to whom shall we cry, where shall we land?[viii]

Uncle Bashira, a dreamer of sorts, often found solace in the men's quarters. He earned the playful nickname "Bombay Hajji," perhaps due to his journey to Bombay alongside a group of pilgrims, only to return without completing the Hajj. Singing praises, he sought comfort in the belief that the time wasn't ripe yet, but one day, he would undoubtedly be beckoned to Medina. With a wistful air, he'd lift his voice in the melody of "endure the pain, keep on smiling," as though the fabled green dome lay just a breath away.

Continue reciting praises, hum them along,

In their blessings, hardships shall fade away,

Pain and sorrow will come, but they'll pass on by.[ix]

In an era where countless hymns, immersed in the art of qawwali, were regularly echoing from the airwaves of Radio Ceylon, it was more challenging to fathom the secret comfort these devotional tunes and qawwalis held for the hearts steeped in pain.

At first, Uncle Bashira made an effort to sidestep me. He seemed not to acknowledge my presence at all. Maybe he was lost in an entirely different realm. The radio's dial, after the cacophony of searching, had finally come to rest at a station where a songstress, her voice laden with sorrow and captivating charm, was singing this melody:

> How shall we navigate this boat of life anew,
> Why have you left us adrift in a storm, askew?
> In the whirlpool, may our boat not sink or sway,
> The sun has drowned in the sky, darkness holds its sway.
> In this life, who knows when the dawn shall break someday.[x]

I felt as if this heart-wrenching song was a commentary on our own community's melancholic life. Until now, I had considered these radio tunes as mere entertainment; today, sitting with Uncle Bashira, it felt as if our own lives were connected to this mournful song. Before uncle Bashira's fingers could move again on the radio dial and another song or qawwali would start from some station, I handed him a fresh newspaper and asked him to explain the real reason behind the news of the killings and bloodshed of Muslims in Ahmedabad. What has suddenly happened to these Hindus that they want to drive us out of this country?

He said, with a sigh, "It's politics, dear. Religion is just an excuse, a veil hiding the truth."

I frowned, confused. "What do you mean?" I asked, my voice filled with curiosity. "After all, Hindus live around our village too, and our own Mangla and his entire family are Hindu. They're lovely people."

A faint, knowing smile appeared on Uncle Bashira's face, as he attempted to make sense of the situation for me. "My child, ordinary Hindus are not against us; we have had centuries of interaction with them. However, the Hindu elite—the ones who hold power—cannot tolerate the challenge to their dominance. Before the arrival of Muslims, lower caste Hindus were not considered human beings in this country. But the teachings of Islam, which promote equality, changed many of their lives as they converted to Islam. Now, after independence, not only are equality, justice, freedom, and fraternity

guaranteed in the constitution, but also benefits like reservation have been granted to lower caste Hindus. The Hindu elite, bitter and resistant to change, hold Islam and Muslims responsible for this social and ideological revolution. Some of their organizations believe that as long as Muslims with their ideological message exist in this country, the dominance of upper caste Hindus cannot be firmly established."

And so, with Uncle Bashira's words, I began to see the truth behind the turmoil. It wasn't about religion—it was about power, and the lengths some would go to maintain it.

At that moment, uncle Bashira's explanation eluded my comprehension, though I did glean that Hindus seemed to come in two varieties. The good kind included our own Mangla and the temple's young priest, who often chatted with uncle Shabrati and treated us kids to sweets during the fair. My encounters with the bad kind, however, remained limited to heart-wrenching tales of their atrocities in newspapers.

One fateful day, I observed a woman balancing a water-filled clay pot upon her head, her seven or eight-year-old child in tow. Why, it was Ahmad, our playmate. Abruptly, a powerful gust of wind swept through, causing the woman to lose her footing. As the pot tumbled from her head, a cry pierced the air, and Ahmad's head rolled away like a stray football. Undeterred, the woman pressed forward with her injured child. Then, suddenly, chaos erupted. A throng of people wielding spears and shouting "Jai Bajrang Bali" (a Hindu slogan) surrounded us. The temple priest, and there was Mangla, clutching a mace reminiscent of those found in fantastical tales. Flames danced at the mace's tip as he advanced towards me. Before he could strike, I screamed. My mother awoke me with a start, admonishing me for reading magical stories before bed.

How could I convey that the danger was real? In Ahmadabad, innumerable mothers had suffered their own personal apocalypses, with the litany of horrific incidents still unfolding in newspapers and magazines. One day, I beheld the scene where, at the edge of our house, the gardens gave way to deer frolicking, clouds shrouding the sky, and children lost in various games. Suddenly, a mounted man

brandishing a sword approached. He carried the very Zulfiqar (a sword) that graced the walls of our home with pride. Who was this mysterious rider? He bore an uncanny resemblance to Mangla—it was him. My eyes flew open in terror. I pondered: our Mangla was never like this, so why did he invade my dreams, sword in hand?

One dusky night, slumber led me to the famed Aqsa Mosque, where I bore witness to an intriguing scene. A handful of mysterious figures endeavored to snuff out the candle's gentle flame that graced the mosque's dome. As they extinguished its light, I would revive it once more, creating a dance of fire and darkness that persisted.

This dream, a lengthy one, wove an enchanting tapestry of a magical world that seemed to envelop me, even as day bled into night. In the courtyard, a macabre gallery adorned the walls: twelve antelope heads, azure cows, and the remnants of other hunted beasts—once a testament to nature's majesty, now suspended in eerie silence. Every moment brought with it the apprehension that some arcane force might breathe life into these relics.

The boundless expanse of verdant fields and orchards, once the source of joy and delight, now instilled terror. Even the ducks and geese, swimming carefree in their ponds, seemed to carry an ominous air. My heart raced with trepidation, fearing that from behind any shrub or copse, an unseen adversary might emerge, sword brandished.

The specter of beheaded Ahmad haunted my waking thoughts, his grisly visage ever-present in my mind's eye. Then, one sun-drenched afternoon, as I retraced my steps homeward, I felt an ethereal presence whispering adieus. Though I searched for the source of the voice, it remained elusive. When I confided in my father about the peculiar encounter, he dismissed it with a wave of his hand, simply saying, "It was just bidding farewell; there's no need for concern."

In those bygone days, the village hummed with whispers of ghosts and spirits. Some stories, likely woven from the rich tapestries of old women's imaginations, were shared as cautionary tales to keep children tethered to their homes as twilight descended. The enduring tradition and imaginative reinforcement of these tales made it easy to control

young minds, who would hurriedly devour their meals, driven by fear. My experience with these tales, however, deviated from the norm.
When I first arrived in the village, the pristine beauty of the lush, fruit-laden trees and the verdant meadows evoked a sense of indescribable fortune. I cannot recall a moment when I felt dull or burdened while wandering the path from home to school. I moved with the grace of a deer, as if gliding rather than walking. The logic behind this sensation eluded me then, but looking back, I understand that life in the embrace of nature, where all exists in its purest form, untainted by the divisions of race, class, or religion, truly embodies innocence. Who wouldn't yearn to linger in such a valley of nature?

Yet, the incident of arson in the Aqsa Mosque and the relentless occurrences of devastation inflicted upon the Muslims in Ahmedabad had, in truth, robbed me of my childhood. The fields and meadows where I once wandered alone now filled my heart with trepidation. When these bushes and trees materialized in my dreams, their terror became ineffable.
One day, as if from the depths of a fever dream, I awoke to a world where the nightmarish scenes from my slumber seemed to bleed into reality. "There, catch him... Fire, smoke, spear..." And in his hands, there was even the sword Zulfiqar! I cried out, my voice shaking the heavens above me. Where? No one. People tried to pull me from my stupor, but I gestured wildly in every direction. There was nothing there, just the courtyard. Oh, it's just Mangla. As the fog of terror lifted, I saw Mangla tenderly watering the flower beds. Observing my petrified state, he grinned with a sense of shared vulnerability and said, "Child, were you scared too?" and handed me a fresh rose as a symbol of comfort and reassurance.
As the parade of dreams persisted, my father grew concerned about the spell that storybooks had cast on me. The time had come to break the enchantment, to immerse me in proper education and free me from the grip of these fantastical tales. And so, one day he took me with him to the city. Typically, at the end of the week, my father would pause at

the door, meticulously adjusting his sherwani buttons, bidding farewell to my mother, and accepting a parting paan from her hands, despite his lack of enthusiasm for it. But this time, along with the paan, my mother entrusted me to his care, arming me with provisions for the journey ahead and the hope that I would soon be liberated from the captivating power of the stories that had haunted my dreams.

4
A damn daybreak

Initially, there was no pang of sorrow as I prepared to leave the village, perhaps due to the abruptness of my journey's organization, which left me no time to ponder its mysteries and consequences. But as the train let out its departure cry and the undulating fields and orderly rows of trees outside the window murmured their goodbyes, my heart ached for the vibrant life of the village, the lifelong gatherings of camaraderie, and the warmth of the men's drawing room.

Still, I found solace in the idea that the city would offer a plethora of enchanting books waiting to be devoured, an abundance of newspapers and periodicals eager to share their knowledge, and most importantly, the irresistible opportunity to immerse myself in the scholarly circles of the library.

In recent days, I had felt a creeping loneliness in the company of my village friends, as if an invisible presence whispered in my ear, and the boundlessness of the fields and open spaces began to fill me with an unexplainable unease. In this light, I reassured myself that in the bustling city, I would, without a doubt, find an escape from the haunting disquiet that plagued me.

It had been but a few fleeting days when, on an otherwise unremarkable morning, an unexpected knock echoed through the door. Peering out, I beheld a sight that caught me unawares: Alam, the rickshaw driver, sobbing uncontrollably, tears cascading down his cheeks. My father endeavored to offer solace, but in doing so, his own eyes betrayed him, brimming with tears that threatened to spill over.

As it transpired, the strife that had consumed Ahmadabad - a tale we'd become all too familiar with through the pages of the newspapers - had enveloped Alam's very own hearth and home. Known far and wide for his diligence and unwavering integrity, Alam belonged to the myriad souls who placed their hard-earned savings and dreams into my

father's trustworthy hands, hoping to someday embark on a propitious business venture.

Through years of relentless labor, Alam had amassed a modest fortune. Alas, the pandemonium that seized Ahmadabad mercilessly extinguished his aspirations; his brother perished amid the chaos, and his family was left fractured, a mere shadow of its former self.

"Now there's nothing left, all I see before me is an abyss of darkness, swallowing the light," lamented Alam, the rickshaw driver, as tears cascaded down his cheeks.

"You must find the strength within you and persevere. Now, not only must you take care of your brother's children, but also orchestrate their education and upbringing with the utmost care. Our responsibility has grown heavier, like an anchor pulling us down. Regardless, we must remain unwavering in the face of adversity, for if we falter, our enemies will seize the opportunity to strike," I consoled him, feeling the weight of his despair.

Alam, the rickshaw driver, departed after unburdening his heart, leaving me with the stark realization that the harrowing situation faced by Muslims in Ahmedabad is not merely a distant tale. Instead, it's a raw, palpable experience that has obliterated all of his carefully laid plans for the future.

The following day, Uncle Zaki broached the topic of the unrest in Ahmedabad once more. While he held the position of a mathematics professor at the local college, we had always known him to be deeply invested in the well-being of the community. He would often drop by our bookshop, the maktaba, for a short time after returning from college, engaging in discussions about current events or initiating conversations on scholarly subjects. On this day, his eyes seemed to be filled with a particular kind of worry, bordering on despair.

He remarked, "Hafiz Sahab, the situation is quite dire. It feels as if we're witnessing the decline of Delhi all over again." He went on, "The details emerging from the riots in Ahmedabad paint a picture of an apocalypse that has just passed. It makes me wonder if people even remember the invasion of Nadir Shah."

"Yes, indeed, may Allah help us, the situation is extremely serious," Father responded, his voice heavy with concern. He continued, "The truth is, ever since the partition in 1947, we have been confronted with a new decline each day. While the fall of Delhi is well documented, the general public is less aware of this continuous decline that we have been grappling with since 1947. Don't you feel as though something is perpetually breaking, crumbling away, and that this chain of events simply refuses to cease?"

"Yes, you're absolutely right," Uncle Zaki agreed. He continued, "We thought that the wounds of the partition would heal quickly and life would return to normal, but the riots in Ahmedabad have sounded the alarm bells. There is also a growing sense of unease among the Congress-supporting Muslims. Just yesterday, Maulana Abdul Aleem visited my elder brother. We have never seen him so agitated before. He claimed that the Congress has turned its back on the Muslims. Indira Gandhi is facing opposition from her own party members on the Muslim issue. In such times, Maulana insisted that instead of criticizing and mocking the Prime Minister, we should support her."

"How bizarre!" Father expressed his astonishment, asking, "When will these Maulanas ever grasp the truth?"

"What lies ahead, Hafiz Sahab?" Uncle Zaki asked, his voice laced with a sense of foreboding.

"In my view, an entire generation will wither away just attempting to decipher this grand illusion. And when their eyes finally open, they will confront the stark reality of the so-called freedom and democracy they have been granted," Father replied, his words echoing the melancholy that pervaded the room.

Faiz's words echo in the room, "This isn't the dawn we've been waiting for, is it?" Shadaan Farooqi, who had been silently absorbed in a book, couldn't help but interject, drawn into the conversation by the passionate exchange. He continued, "Despair, you see, lingers on both sides of the border. For Muslims, this so-called freedom emerged as a fracture, splintering their collective strength into three disparate geographical parts. And as for the fall of Delhi you speak of, the

psychological wound remains raw, a gash that has yet to heal, perpetually bleeding out our hopes and dreams."

As the elders conversed, weaving a tapestry of thoughts and emotions, I found myself grasping at the edges, trying to make sense of it all. The notion of an invisible wound, silently hemorrhaging pain and despair, made me wonder if they were speaking of the headless child that haunted my dreams. The child, whose head would slip from its body as if the strings of life had been cut, leaving a torrent of blood pouring from the severed jugular.

The rickshaw driver's tale swam in my thoughts, recounting his struggles and his hope to bring his brother from Ahmedabad and together start a small business in this city. I could almost hear the desperation in his voice, the broken sobs asking whether Muslims didn't deserve a dignified and peaceful existence in this country.

And yet, despite the anguish of the driver, the mysterious wound, the headless child, and the rivulets of blood, the picture remained incomplete, an enigma that continued to elude my understanding. As the weight of these images bore down upon me, I searched for clarity within the chaos, seeking to make sense of the world around me in this labyrinthine narrative.

Every day, the bookshop became a magnet for an eclectic assortment of mail. Newspapers, magazines, postcards, and envelopes jumbled together with new book lists, ads for prayer offerings, and printed money order forms from spiritual retreats, all clamoring for attention. Sometimes, these envelopes would even spill forth sugar-coated sweets, sent as blessings with the hope that their sweetness would inspire generosity in others.

One languid day, my eyes locked onto an ad in a magazine called "Manadi," promoting a book called "A'mal Hizb al-Bahr." This new edition promised to reveal the secret practices that spiritual masters had kept hidden for years, and most enticingly, it claimed to hold the key to changing one's destiny. It was a treasure trove of esoteric wisdom, all for the modest sum of three rupees and fifty paise, not including postage.

This ad stirred a curiosity within me, and as I flipped through the magazine, I discovered another ad for a book by the same author, Khwaja Sahib. This one, titled "Asrar Kalam Allah wa Ism A'zam," could only be acquired by sending a written confidentiality agreement, as it contained the most sacred and secret knowledge about the words of Allah and the Greatest Name. It was a tantalizing offer for the mere price of three rupees.

The next page drew me in further, inviting readers to attend the Satrahvin Sharif, a gathering held on the 17th day of the auspicious month. It was a place where special recitations for solving life's problems would be conducted, as they always were. A request was made for one hundred needy people to share their reasons for seeking prayers or recitations before the Urs, the death anniversary of a saint. Contact details, including telephone numbers and postal addresses, were listed below, reaching out like tendrils to connect the spiritual world with our own.

In a moment of contemplation, I wondered if I should give this intriguing remedy a try. What an astonishing feat it would be if it could truly pierce through life's obstacles and find its mark. Despite this, a persistent doubt, or perhaps an insidious whisper of skepticism, lingered within my heart. Eventually, curiosity triumphed, and I resolved to send a postcard addressed to the ancient chamber of Hazrat Khwaja Nizamuddin.

Days passed in silence, until one fateful day when an envelope, adorned with advertisements, arrived at my doorstep, containing white sugar-coated sweets and a printed money order form worth five rupees. It seemed as though the blessings I sought had materialized through the strokes of my pen. Upon discovering that I had sent the postcard to Khwaja Hassan Thani, fueled by dreams of overcoming life's challenges and altering destiny, and that the sugar-coated sweets had been sent as a response, my father could only offer a knowing, subtle smile.

As winter approached and the new year loomed, preparations were being made to formally enroll my elder brother Arshad, who was two and a half years my senior, in school. A teacher visited each day,

sharing the gifts of English, mathematics, and the beautiful art of penmanship. His writing was a tapestry of elegance, and as he weaved words with his carefully carved bamboo pen upon the smooth white paper, I found myself lost in the captivating dance of his fingers and the breathtaking beauty of his craft.

One fateful day, as I carried a cup of tea to Master Sahib, I chanced upon a stick hanging from a hook. A whimsical thought wove itself into my imagination. The teacher, sitting on a simple mat, would lose himself in his art, cradling a large sheet of paper on his lap, dipping his pen into the inkwell resting on the floor. Stealthily, I hid the stick's handle behind a cupboard, giving it a slight nudge just so that the inkwell toppled over in the blink of an eye. The world of concentration surrounding Master Sahib shattered in that moment. Arshad Bhai rose to his feet, but before anyone could grasp the unfolding calamity, I had vanished from the scene.

When word of my mischief echoed through the house, people were left bewildered as to how I could have orchestrated such an act. The stick's handle had hit its mark, and for a fleeting moment, I reveled in my success. But soon, the tendrils of regret encased me. My father, rather than chastising me, imparted a lesson: "When God bestows upon someone a gift like a staff, their responsibility also grows." At the time, the philosophical depth of his words eluded me. But now, as I reflect upon those days, my admiration for his unique approach to nurturing swells within me.

At that moment, there were no plans for my enrollment in school. Preparations were underway for my elder brother, but I became resolute in joining him. The ambiance in the school had an air of familiarity to it. One observation I made was that many of the teachers seemed to be familiar faces, often encountered in the bookshop. Master Inayat Sahib, the sixth-grade class teacher, was imparting the art of drawing to the students. With the tip of his pencil, he traced lines upon the white paper in such a manner that a beautiful stool materialized first, and then, as if conjured by magic, a tray and a teacup appeared upon the stool. He angled the pencil in such a way that the steam seemed to rise from the teacup. The entire process

captivated me. I contemplated that if this was the teaching style in the sixth grade, then the experience would be filled with delight and exhilaration.

In response to my unwavering persistence, I found myself enrolled in the sixth grade alongside my brother Arshad Bhai, our shared journey in learning just beginning to unfurl.

The school was situated about one and a half to two kilometers from my home, a distance that seemed to stretch on for miles as I walked, carrying with me the weight of the expectations placed upon my shoulders. Scattered along the route, there were other schools, their presence a constant reminder of the educational landscape, but this particular one had been chosen for a reason. It was a haven for those seeking a more religious environment, with a majority of Muslim students and teachers gracing its halls.

The city also harbored a Christian missionary school, tucked away at the farthest edge of the urban sprawl, but for Muslims, the mere thought of enrolling their children there felt tainted by sin, or at the very least, frowned upon.

Within the walls of my chosen school, the Urdu language held a special place in the hearts of the students and teachers alike. It wasn't simply the medium of instruction; it was a living, breathing entity that wove its way through the fabric of our education. There were weekly Urdu literary events, and each class played host to a small club dedicated to the appreciation of Urdu books and periodicals.

It was here, amidst the cacophony of young voices and the scent of ink on paper, that I first came to understand the divide that existed within the Muslim society. A chasm that separated the elite from the common people, and it was here that I first heard the name Abdul Qayyum Ansari, a name that echoed through the corridors and etched itself into my consciousness.

The majority of my fellow students, hailing from Muslim-majority neighborhoods, were fervent supporters of Abdul Qayyum, who led the Momin Conference. They viewed Indira Gandhi as a beacon of hope, a friend and ally to the Muslims. But there were no logical

arguments underpinning their support, and I found myself adrift in a sea of political uncertainty, unable to make sense of the issue.

What did become clear, though, was that the Muslim community was riven by a fierce debate over whether to view the Congress party as an enemy. This was the very same Congress party that, in Ahmedabad, had overseen a cataclysmic event, the horrific details of which still haunted the darkest corners of my mind.

One day, whispers filled the air that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was gracing our city with her presence. The Polo Ground, where she was scheduled to address the masses, was not a world away from our humble abode. In fact, during a time when vast expanses of uninhabited land stretched far and wide, the Polo Ground was clearly visible from our bookshop. This was an opportunity too precious to pass up.

With my father's permission, I joined the throng at her election rally. It seemed that when any notable political figure or distinguished religious and academic personality paid a visit to our city, people like us were granted the chance to witness such occasions.

Mrs. Gandhi's arrival had summoned a sea of people. Her speech, though devoid of passionate intensity, was imbued with heartfelt pleas and entreaties. Her voice carried a subtle feminine allure that whispered to the listener, perhaps she spoke the truth, that casting a vote her way would do no harm. And if she were to gain a significant majority, she would obliterate the specter of poverty haunting our country.

Upon my return, I shared with my father the revelation that Indira Gandhi aspired to eradicate poverty from our land. He smiled gently at my guilelessness and remarked, "She doesn't truly wish to vanquish poverty, but rather to rid the world of the poor themselves. With no reeds, there can be no flute music."

The city was abuzz with Mrs. Gandhi's election tour, her words like honeyed whispers promising to rid the world of poverty, casting a spell on the people. Yet, my mind felt torn, confused. Ahmedabad's wounds still bled fresh, the riots that took place under her watchful eye, her

own Congress government. The Muslim community was caught in a whirlwind of uncertainty, their future clouded by shadows. Would they, could they, vote for Congress again?

In the midst of this chaos, I thought back to the Polo Ground where Mrs. Gandhi's voice danced through the air, a melody of hope for the downtrodden, the forgotten. Why then, did my father's view of her hold such criticism, an air of hostility? The answer eluded me, slipping through my fingers like sand.

As was his habit, my father had us read the newspaper to him, his ears drinking in the stories of the day. On this particular day, the task fell to me. I told him of the decision made by the Muslim community to support Indira Gandhi, urging their fellow believers to vote for the calf, the symbol of Congress. He asked to see the news for himself, his eyes scanning the page where an advertisement from the All India Momin Conference was printed. He explained that this wasn't a religious organization, but a political and cultural one. The name Abdul Qayyum Ansari was written beneath the appeal, a man whose memoir was discussed passionately by school children.

Despite this revelation, the enigma persisted: how could a woman as refined as Indira Gandhi, with a heart seemingly full of empathy for the poor and weak, allow such brutal injustice against Muslims in Ahmedabad under her own government?

There I was, utterly captivated by the newspaper 'Dawat,' when an elder sauntered into the bookshop. Clad in a pristine white kurta-pajama, a turban resting upon his head, his countenance radiant, and his large, deep-set eyes peeking out from behind oversized frames. I recognized this venerable figure who frequently journeyed across the nation, contributing to the establishment of the newspaper 'Dawat.' He belonged to my father's circle of friends and happened to be a distant relative.

With my father absent, I seized the opportunity to pose a question to this wise elder in a scholarly manner, "Grandfather! Will you too cast your vote for Indira Gandhi?"

A smile graced his lips as he responded, "My dear child, we do not bestow our votes upon anyone. We have already pledged our vote to the Almighty." The significance of his words eluded me at that moment, but later I discovered that those associated with Jamaat-e-Islami considered the act of empowering a system of disbelief (kufr) with their votes as contrary to their faith. My father appeared amidst this discourse, leaving my question unanswered. Nevertheless, the exchange between them revealed that Mrs. Gandhi's mellifluous speeches were proving fruitless in swaying the convictions of our esteemed elders.

5
Guiding Light

On Fridays, the bookshop brimmed with energy and excitement. People from neighboring villages and towns would begin arriving early in the morning. Some arrived in their shampnai, a quaint horse-drawn carriage with cozy seating tucked behind wooden doors. When Uncle Shama alighted from his shampnai, a waft of delightful fragrances enveloped the area.

The Nawab of Paighambarpur often appeared leaning on a cane, casually mentioning that his doctors had advised him to walk. Although the nobles understood that such excuses were made to conceal financial difficulties, as he could not afford a shampnai or carriage, they politely refrained from questioning him further.

Among the crowd was a man perpetually lost in his own world. His name remained a mystery, but people referred to him as Allama Khorish. Although his eyesight was deteriorating, he had devoured countless literary works in his prime. His conversations were adorned with eloquent Persian and Urdu poetry; however, since being consumed by a state of ecstasy and intoxication, he mostly maintained a silence. At times, he would share his wealth of knowledge and wisdom, but occasionally his speech would falter, leaving his words fractured and his control slipping away. A look of anguish would cross his face as if someone had snatched away his eloquence, and he would search the empty void with his glistening eyes. Witnessing his helplessness on such occasions was truly heart-wrenching.

That day, by chance, Allama Khorish was in attendance at the Friday gathering, accompanied by Professor Sahib. The professor, accustomed to indulging in fine cuisine, contrasted with Allama Khorish's nonchalant attitude towards dining. He would contentedly partake in the meal without uttering a single complaint. However, on this particular day, his demeanor took an uncharacteristically somber turn. He began to say, "I wonder when the Muslims of India will be granted

the privilege to perform the Friday prayers. All this is a mere ritual in which we are trapped—empty of spiritual essence. Every captive Friday feels like someone is rubbing salt into our wounds."

Uncle Shahma's voice rose, a tinge of frustration apparent, "Secularism, now deemed an Islamic obligation, has the elders of the community, both ulema and politicians, staunchly supporting the Indian National Congress. But really, what choice do Muslims have? For all its flaws, Congress at least utters a few sympathetic words for them," Nawab Sahab chimed in, contemplative.

"Words, mere words," Shahma shook his head, "The once-mighty Nehru-Gandhi party has changed. Consider cow slaughter—Gandhi opposed a ban despite pressure, and Nehru refused legislation against it. Yet now, Indira seems determined to outshine even the revivalist Hindus." Shahma sighed, wearied by the thought.

"But what can Indira do?" he queried, his voice tinged with resignation. "The masses besieged Parliament, protesting cow slaughter, and even the Shankaracharyas lent their support. Interior Minister Gulzari Lal Nanda, it's whispered, colluded with them. Indira, like any politician, did what she could. The nation's mood is shifting." Shahma paused, gathering his thoughts before adding, "And the Ahmedabad riots? A product of Congress's internal intrigue. The Morarji Desai faction, seeking to weaken Indira, finds support in the revivalist Hindus. In such a climate, Indira can't champion the cause of Muslims."

"Then, how can these gatherings of scholars, leaders of the Momin Conference, and distinguished Muslim figures place their hopes on the Congress, anticipating that it will protect and work for the betterment of Muslims?" Nawab Sahab questioned with doubt. "They are lost, utterly lost," the professor proclaimed with a tinge of sadness. "You're right; whether it's the assemblies of clerics or secular Muslim politicians, these poor souls can't fathom the catastrophe that has struck them. If you don't even realize what's been snatched away from you, you become a prisoner in a realm of never-ending fear and

confusion. Each day, something new is taken, and before you can wrap your head around the enormity of the disaster or attempt to comprehend it, another occurrence robs you of even more. A ceaseless whirlwind of astonishment, relentless fear, and boundless sorrow – that's our narrative. A frozen, aching wound that time's remedy fails to touch. What do you know of this agony?" As Allama Khorish spoke, his voice quivered with emotion. "The crux of the matter is whether we'll transmit this torment to future generations or not. Will they ever discover that their ancestors once thrived fearlessly beneath the open sky in this land?" Nawab Sahab sighed heavily, the weight of the situation sinking in. Allama Khorish pulled himself together. Just then, the call to prayer resonated from the Jama Masjid, and the assembly dissolved into the ether.

As I meandered towards the mosque today, the haunting words of Allama Khorish resonated within me: "There's something that's been lost, yet the ones who've lost it remain oblivious to the void it has left." The elusive thing, a phantom of some sort, eluded comprehension. For when wealth and riches vanish, there's hope in their retrieval. But how can one reclaim that which they've lost, when the depths of the loss itself remain an enigmatic mystery?

Allama Khorish has this thing about talking in complicated language, like he's weaving a labyrinth with his words. You know, he could just break it down, make it simple for us. So, this one day, he was all poetic and stuff, and he goes, "My prostrations find no head." Like, what does that even mean, right? I racked my brains, trying to figure out if he meant something deep about a believer's lost possessions or if he was talking about living fearlessly under the wide-open sky, which, let's face it, isn't really an option for Muslims in divided India anymore. And yet, they still side with the Congress party. The more I think about this, the more my head spins.

Now, Mrs. Gandhi, she's all classy and cultured; when she talks, it's like flowers are falling from her mouth or something. She had this speech where she sounded so full of pain for the poor and the weak. But then, how come she lets all this organized violence against Muslims happen under her government? And what's up with her joining forces with Hindu extremists on the whole cow protection issue? Can power really make a person so heartless that they'd tear down homes of people just like them? It's like the cries and pain of the oppressed, the helpless women and children, they just bounce off her cold, stone heart.

What really blows my mind is that when Mrs. Gandhi keeps ignoring Muslims, and her government keeps gifting them new acts of violence each day, worse than the ones before, why don't Muslims just say, "Enough!" and pull their support? You've got these leaders, like religious scholars from the Jamaat-e-Ulema or people like Abdul Qayyum Ansari, and they're all running these intense campaigns supporting Indira Gandhi. Are their brains really that messed up, or have they been totally freaked out by the constant fire and blood around them? The more I think, the more I get that Allama Khorish might be onto something when he says the situation's so bad that it's like the Muslim leaders' minds have frozen over. Then it hits me, my dad used to say it doesn't matter who wins – Indira's Congress, Morarji's, the Communists, or any other opposition party – all that comes our way is more deprivation.

In the end, just as anticipated, the "Eradicate Poverty" slogan delivered a sweeping victory for Mrs. Gandhi. With the elections over, the Muslim issue vanished from public discourse. However, the debate sessions at school took on a new form. The Urdu Literary Society's gatherings, held every other week and usually centered around literary and cultural subjects, now featured an intriguing topic: "The Future of Muslims in India." I thought to myself, the topic is familiar, why not give it a shot? I had never participated in a speech competition before, but I had glimpsed Tufail Ahmed Mangalore's book "A Bright Future for Indian Muslims" at the bookstore. I had also heard much about

Abul Kalam Azad's legendary oratory prowess. My father used to say that when Azad spoke in the wilderness, even the grazing animals and trees would pause to listen. I had some familiarity with Iqbal's poems and Hali's reflections too. So, I assembled what I could and prepared to put it all to use:

> "How did thy essence flee our grasp,
> Why don't the stars in envy gasp?
> Their livers ought to split apart,
> At thy unmatched, celestial art."[xi]

The speech began with this couplet, skillfully blending elements of Maulana Azad's oratory and a touch of Maulana Manglori's optimism. Then, it struck me: why not address the issue that Indian Muslims have lost, an issue of which they are not even aware? Whenever Allama Khorish brings it up, he captivates the audience, seizing their attention. And then, I recited this poignant couplet by Iqbal:

> Alas! The unfulfilled desires of the caravan kept going,
> From the heart of the caravan, the sense of loss kept growing.[xii]

Oh, people! Imagine the astonishment that would sweep over you if you were to uncover the very thing that has slipped through our fingers. The staggering truth is that even our most revered scholars and leaders remain oblivious to it. Today, I stand before you, poised to tear away the veil that shrouds this enigma. The entire speech was woven with such captivating rhetoric. In the end, the essence of Iqbal's verse was summoned forth:

> Even today, should Ibrahim's faith be reborn,
> From the fiercest of fires, a garden could be grown.[xiii]

I revisited the speech, finessing minor details, but the nagging curiosity lingered: what exactly was that elusive thing mentioned with such passion and emphasis? Then it dawned on me that even Allama Khorish speaks of some lost treasure with equal grandeur. Their words cast a spell of awe and intimidation over the audience. In any case, there is no opportunity for questions and answers after the speech, so I felt no qualms about leaving the question enshrouded in mystery. At

last, the day arrived when the school's central hall was adorned for the speech competition. When my turn came and my name was called, it felt as if I had been abruptly summoned to face the ultimate reckoning. Today, the eyes of the entire school were upon me, and I found myself seeking refuge by gazing at the ceiling. The speech unfolded with unabated intensity and grandiosity, but as my eyes met those of the audience, I felt a wave of nervousness wash over me. Somehow, the speech reached its conclusion, and to my astonishment and delight, I saw Master Zafir Sahib nodding in approval and exclaiming, "Now that's a speech!" Zafir Khan Sahib was a physics teacher, tall and broad, with a powerful physique, always standing out among other teachers. When he uttered "No Noise" just once in class, a hush would instantly envelop the room. His emphatic endorsement meant that my speech had been chosen for the school's annual function.

During those days, I stumbled upon an article by Maulana Maududi, where he penned down the experiences and circumstances of his childhood. Under the title "My Childhood," it was likely part of some textbook. Maududi Sahib narrated how a beggar visited his house before his birth and advised his parents to name him Abul Ala. As I read the article, I could sense that his family lineage boasted connections to prominent figures, including Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. His childhood mischief, like rummaging for bounty in his elder brother's food after devouring his own share, and other incidents laced with familial pride felt eerily similar to my personal stories. Reading it made me ponder, why not write my own life story? Perhaps, in doing so, I might stumble upon a way to become an extraordinary individual. My family was already steeped in nobility, spirituality, and mysticism. Then, what was the need to embark on a journey with forty gold coins – asharfis – to become a great person, all the while wrestling with the constant fear of bandits and the ever-present danger to one's life?

The speech competition's success hinted that if I could blend Allama Khorish's thoughtfulness and their heart-wrenching narration with Maulana Azad's grandiloquence and Iqbal's verses, I could captivate the audience and earn their admiration. Even those teachers, who on

ordinary days would not tolerate a fly resting on their nose, would nod in approval. So, why not adorn my childhood stories in a manner similar to Maududi Sahib, making them resemble the life story of a remarkable person?

So there I was, my heart quietly formulating a plan to secretly compile my own life story. I often found myself observing my teacher, Shadan Farooqui Sahib, as he skillfully crafted beautiful borders on crisp white paper, writing his poems in such an elegant script that it appeared printed. It sparked an idea within me—I, too, should buy a notebook, one that mirrored those carried by poets, the perfect vessel for their verses. I had some money saved up and managed to borrow a bit more from my mother. With this, I purchased a stunning notebook for a mere one and a half rupees. The pages were thick, smooth, and a pristine white—so tantalizing to write on.

Now, my home was already filled with various pens and calligraphy tools, but the problem lay in the fact that my own handwriting was far from ideal—bordering on illegible. My solution? Persuading my elder brother Shakib Arshad Sahib to write for me, securing a solemn vow that this was to be a top-secret project, not to be divulged to anyone until its completion.

And so, work commenced with me dictating my story, and my brother carefully transcribing my words into the notebook. During this process, we occasionally stumbled upon disagreements over sentence structure or style, but we always found a resolution through mutual consultation. For a few days, we managed to maintain the utmost secrecy and grace in our writing, but one day, an argument arose—I can't quite remember what it was about. My brother declared that he wouldn't write in my proposed manner, insisting on a different approach. He had already conceded many points to me, and perhaps his patience had reached its limit. The argument escalated, ultimately reaching our father.

Curiosity piqued, our father requested to see the notebook. He flipped through the pages, a smile playing on his lips as he took in my innocent audacity. He looked at me and said, "Son! What have you achieved so far? Who will read your life story now? First, become something, then write your autobiography."

Father put the kibosh on any further showcasing of personal or familial grandeur, but a silver lining emerged from my scholastic victories. In a speech contest, not only did I claim first prize, but I also received words of admiration from an elderly gentleman with a white beard, sitting among the judges. He inquired about my parentage and even paid our home a visit the very next day. As it turned out, his name was Master Mohammad Yaqub, a longtime friend of my father's who, after retiring from government service, was now dedicating his efforts to establishing a school for Muslim girls in the city.

He posed a few formal questions about my education and, in my father's presence, lauded my speech with words of encouragement. He expressed his desire to take me under his tutelage, saying, "I would like Rashid to join my students. I instruct a few boys in the morning, and if he's inclined, he can attend as well." Though Yaqub Sahib's primary focus was mathematics, he held a profound appreciation for literature, philosophy, and Oriental sciences. He was, in the truest sense, a classical pedagogue. Regardless of whether the topic was science or history, politics or other national concerns, his discourse captivated us students to the point that we would listen with eagerness and inquisitiveness, as if his enchanting words had turned us into inanimate stone figures.

He possessed a remarkable talent for rendering even the most complex problems intriguing and accessible, seamlessly weaving stories and anecdotes into his lessons. There was an undeniable charm in his eloquence that never failed to hold his audience spellbound. One day, he appeared somewhat distressed, and he began to say, "Are you aware that the threat of war is escalating in our country? A terrible bloodshed is taking place in Eastern Pakistan. If the situation becomes

unmanageable, a war could erupt once more between India and Pakistan, and wars yield nothing but ruin."

"Can't we halt this looming threat?" A student posed the question, his voice a blend of youthful optimism and naivete. "Why not? But you're all so young; you can't yet fathom the depths of such matters." It seemed as though our unblemished innocence could not bear the weight of their profound musings. I recalled the tales of Morisco Muslims in Spain, of secretive parents disclosing to their children their true Muslim heritage, hidden only by the reluctant conversion to Christianity following the collapse of the Muslim state in Andalusia, all for the sake of self-preservation.

Drawing from my meager understanding, I ventured: "A similar situation arose with Muslims in Spain." He lost himself in thought, mulling over my inquiry. In the wake of a brief silence, as if seeking a simple method to unravel the convoluted tapestry of historical facts, he posed a question of his own: "Do you know the most significant challenge Muslims face in this country?"
"It's the absence of their own political party," Mujahid responded.
"That's merely a facet of the problem; the shell rather than the core. They've lost sight of their duty." He continued, though his words failed to bring clarity. Another student offered an alternative view: "In my opinion, there's no greater issue than corruption."
The response that followed was both poignant and revealing. "There can't be a single answer to this question, but there is a deep, festering wound that demands attention. How can I make you understand? Imagine this: someone murders your loved ones, and you know who the killer is. He lives within your sight, and yet you're compelled to extol his deeds, maintain ties with him, live alongside your father's murderer, sing his praises, and turn to him in times of trouble, despite the hatred still smoldering in his heart for you. In such a circumstance, if someone becomes ensnared, what would your opinion of them be?"

Only this much became clear to us: the matter is complex, entangled in a web of emotions and history, deeper than the Morisco Muslims ever faced. He spoke, a poetic lament pouring from his soul, "In this country, Muslims have long been subjected to hypocrisy and the heinous crime of silence, a knowing refusal to reveal the truth. Their tongues falter, unable to label the killer for what he is. Now take these very issues of violence: Muslims have entrusted everything to the Congress, and it is this very Congress that not only abandons Muslims to the mercy of the rioters but also participates in their mass murder through its government machinery. Despite all this, Muslim leaders conduct campaigns in support of Congress, begging for their protection and tirelessly mentioning Congress's friendship with Muslims."

I was familiar with the term hypocrisy, a deceptive dance around the truth, but I asked, as if a curious child, "What is this crime of silence?"
He replied, his voice a melancholy melody, "It is the deliberate turning away from the truth, a veil cast over reality. Indian Muslims are painfully aware of whose hands are stained with their blood. Our leaders, through their actions, essentially whisper that since we must live alongside them, we must find a way to get along, to tolerate the oppressor, knowing full well that they have not repented their tyranny. It is a torment that even the descriptions of Hell fall short of capturing, a suffocating silence that drowns the soul."
"Why don't we unite and do something?" I asked, my heart swelling with the desire to change our fate.
He sighed, the heaviness of a thousand burdens evident in his voice, "Muslims are fractured, split among sects and classes, as if the threads of a tapestry have come undone. The Ansari, for instance, cast their votes for Congress, hoping for a few government scraps and the chance to send a handful of their own to Parliament and the Assembly. The religious scholars of Jamiat-e-Ulema also resist the birth of independent political thought among Muslims, content with the occasional favors Congress tosses their way. The common Muslims?

They've become pawns in the hands of these political and religious puppet masters."

"But there's the Muslim League, isn't there? Why don't Muslims choose to vote for them?" I persisted, seeking a glimmer of hope.

"The Muslim League's interpretation of Islam offers no solace, no refuge for our cause," he replied, a tinge of bitterness seeping through his words.

"However, Muslims were already torn between Congress and the Muslim League, right?" I ventured again, the fragments of my knowledge forming a puzzle I desperately wanted to solve.

"What could they have done?" he mused, his voice tinged with melancholy. "The Muslim League emerged to guard the interests of the Ashraf class."

"Ashraf?" I questioned, unfamiliar with the term.

"Ah, yes. Those considered the high-born Muslims," he explained, a hint of sorrow in his voice. "And yet, we are all the children of Adam, equal in the eyes of God. So, what could the lower-caste Muslims do? They sought solace, protection, in the embrace of Congress's affection, a false and fickle love that left them adrift on a sea of uncertainty."

I casually mentioned, "Maulana Azad, you know, the one who penned 'Qaul-e-Faisal,' must have been quite a figure, right?" attempting to flaunt my literary knowledge.

He responded, "Indeed, Abul Kalam Azad and Husain Ahmad Madani were remarkable in their own right, but their family backgrounds kept them from ascending the Muslim League's ranks. Thus, they had no choice but to embrace the warmth of Congress's protection."

I couldn't help but let out a surprised, "Ahh!"

He went on, "It's astonishing, really, how even the most revered religious leaders among us have succumbed to this insidious belief in lineage and caste. 'Bihishti Zewar' even lays out guidelines for mingling with the so-called lowly and high-born. Maulana Zakaria of the Tablighi Jamaat, the mind behind 'Tablighi Nisab,' endorsed the caste system as well. In a shocking move, he ousted the third Ameer Maulana Rahmatullah just because his roots were in the Teli

community, a so-called lower caste. But I digress. It's best we leave this story be." And with that, Yaqub Sahab concluded the gathering.

I was oblivious to the depth of contradiction around caste and lineage in Muslim society until it stared me in the face. Memories of my school friends' laughter echoed in my head when they questioned my identity, lacking Khan, Syed, or Ansari attached to my name. "Momin," I had replied, but my declaration was met with ridicule. They didn't understand the wisdom imparted by my devout aunt, who instructed me to declare our family as Momins. But in the eyes of my school friends, my Momin identity wasn't enough.

A visit to the Muslim neighborhood with classmates brought an unexpected revelation. As the day's play ended with the Maghrib prayer call, life seemed to come to a sudden halt. The neighborhood mosque swelled with worshippers, young and old, all immersed in their ablutions. During the prayer, a captivating chorus of "Ameen" filled the air as the Imam finished reciting Surah Fatiha. This was my first encounter with such a powerful, communal expression of faith. I shared this experience with my mother, describing how the Maghrib prayer felt as bustling as Eid prayers. She acknowledged the reason for their prosperity in both spiritual and worldly affairs, but I was left puzzled. Why were these devout Muslims, their Ameen a faith-inspiring symphony, steadfast in their support of Congress?

6
Echoes of Exodus

The aftermath of Mrs. Gandhi's stunning electoral triumph had pushed Ahmedabad's riots to the periphery of our collective consciousness. Instead, disquieting accounts trickled in from East Pakistan. One day, I caught my father in a candid moment, his voice firm, "Justice demands that Mujib be granted the opportunity to lead the government. The 'I rule here, you rule there' atmosphere, a reference to Western and Eastern Pakistan, spawned by Bhutto, will force our entire Muslim nation to endure the repercussions." Indian newspapers only exposed one facet of the situation, leaving us grasping at straws about the actual events unfolding there.

It was during this unsettling period that a letter arrived from Uncle Jilani in Chittagong, plunging our household into a whirlpool of shock and anguish.

23 June 1971,
Kaler Ghat, Chittagong,
East Pakistan

Dear Syedi Hafiz Noor-ul-Hoda Sahib Zaid Lutfa,

Peace and blessings be upon you.

I trust you and your loved ones are well. The situation here in East Pakistan is escalating with an alarming ferocity. Muslims are turning on each other, bloodthirsty and relentless. There's no safe haven to be found, leaving us wondering: where can we turn? During Partition, we believed we were migrating from the former Dar al-Islam, India, to a new one in East Pakistan. Now, we find ourselves searching for passage to West Pakistan. A friend, who holds a high position in the Pakistani army, has pledged to make arrangements for our journey. Some families, who, like us, migrated from Bihar and UP, are attempting to return to India. However, that path is perilous as well,

marred by tales of robbery, violence, and bloodshed. The thought of returning to Dar al-Kufr is inconceivable to us.

Your sister-in-law longs to visit India, to reunite with cherished family and friends. It feels as if only moments have passed since we abandoned our fields and farms, our eyes filled with dreams of a new life in Pakistan. And yet, now, the land seems to close in around us, stifling our very breath. Bengali Muslims lament their subjugation by the West Pakistani elite, who show contempt for their language and culture. The irony is that the nation's wealth springs from the very soil of East Pakistan, nourished by its tea and cotton crops. The Bengalis have come to believe that if they were to invest their resources locally, prosperity would surely follow. They also observe the dominance of Urdu speakers in positions of power. Many Bengali scholars now speak openly of the deception they've faced in the name of Islam. The question remains: who has truly been deceived? For migrants like ourselves, it's becoming painfully clear that we have been chasing an illusion all along.

Over these past months, we've borne witness to countless acts of violence committed by Muslims against their own kind, and it's shaken our faith in the leaders of the Indian independence movement. Was the difficulty of managing two distinct regions of Pakistan not apparent to Jinnah? The toll has been immense; innumerable lives have been destroyed, and millions have been swallowed by the crimson tide of partition and migration. What has come of all this suffering? We were once known as migrants, but now, we're counted among the displaced. It even occurs to me that Jinnah, Gandhi, and all the other prominent figures of the independence movement may not have had our best interests at heart. Perhaps they were, in truth, tools of the British, who sought to pursue their own petty desires and quest for power at the expense of the Indian subcontinent. The resulting devastation is a tragedy beyond words. May Allah grant us the strength and guidance to perform righteous deeds.

In these times of immense struggle, may Allah grant us success in escaping from here. Indeed, the gap between life and death has become alarmingly narrow. Let's keep faith and hold on to hope, for even in the darkest hour, there might be a glimmer of light.
Yours lovingly,
M K Jilani

In recent times, my father's silence has grown more pronounced. He frequently rests his right hand just beneath his chin, seemingly submerged in profound contemplation. In moments of intense anguish, he finds solace by repeating, "Allah is the Cause of all causes." This phrase, "ya musabbabul asbab," a Quranic expression, has become his personal mantra, particularly when he is faced with adversity. With eyes lifted towards the heavens and a heart brimming with helplessness, these words unfailingly escape his lips as a plea for strength and guidance during times of distress.

One day, as Abba found himself ensconced in hushed conversation with his dear friend Zaki Sahab within the warm embrace of the maktaba (bookshop), the atmosphere hummed with a sense of community where everyone was welcomed to participate as their ranks permitted. However, on this particular day, their whispered words revolved around a letter received from Jilani Bhai. Abba's heart couldn't help but tighten with worry for his maternal brother's current state, as the letter had already aged four months, its arrival perhaps delayed by the invisible hand of censorship.
"From where did he pen this missive?" a voice tinged with curiosity asked. "Rumors abound that separate encampments have been established for the detainees."
"Chittagong," Abba replied, his voice laced with concern. "I remain uncertain whether passage to West Pakistan has been secured or not."
Zaki Sahab's sigh carried the weight of disappointment. "It's heart-wrenching, truly. If even in Pakistan one cannot find solace, what is a person to do?" As his words settled in the air, his tone shifted, offering reassurance. "Still, Jilani Bhai is a man of resourcefulness. No doubt, he must have discovered some means of escape."

As the military and paramilitary forces of India steadily increased their intervention in East Pakistan, a pervasive sense of anxiety took hold of Abba, and our home became steeped in an atmosphere of grief and sorrow. Sorting through the myriad news reports, it was nearly impossible to pinpoint the true source of the atrocities – whether it was the Pakistani army, Indian paramilitary groups, or Bengali nationalist movement flag bearers. Yet one undeniable fact remained: these groups, acting in unison, had brought torment upon Jilani Chacha and countless other innocent, virtuous souls who had migrated with visions of an idyllic Islamic community dancing in their eyes.

One fateful day, we heard reports of Pakistani forces launching a bombardment, and the city abruptly announced a dusk-to-dawn blackout. The ever-present dread of a bomb falling from the sky weighed heavily on us all. Although Abba had never been much of a radio enthusiast, he found himself scrutinizing news broadcasts from Radio Pakistan and the BBC, attempting to dissect the Indian government's propaganda. When Indian publications reported the bombardment of Dhaka and Chittagong, Abba would writhe in anguish, like a fish gasping for air. Our entire household was so consumed by the crisis that each bomb dropped by the Indian Air Force felt as if it was landing squarely on Jilani Chacha himself.

On one hand, as Indian citizens, we were told that the Indian forces belonged to us and that we should take pride in their strategic prowess and victories. On the other hand, our own kin were caught in the crossfire of these very strategies. Jilani Chacha was not just our blood relative but also among those who had sincerely undertaken the migration for the sake of Islam. We found ourselves torn between our faith, our family, our nation, and its valiant armed forces. I struggled to determine where my loyalty should lie. It seemed as if supporting Islam would inevitably brand me a traitor to my own country.

One day, as if the universe had been waiting to deliver a blow, the news arrived that Indian forces had achieved a decisive victory in East Pakistan. Joy and celebration enveloped India. Mrs. Gandhi, in her grand announcement before Parliament, declared Dhaka the liberated capital of a free nation. To Abba, the news struck like a thunderbolt,

tearing through the fabric of our souls. Our once vibrant household found itself paralyzed, the scholarly gatherings at the bookshop left hollow and abandoned.

Abba retreated into a shell, mostly silent and lying down, his eyes gazing blankly into the void. It seemed that neither the worry for Jilani Bhai nor the longing for a fresh letter held any significance now, as if a perpetual restlessness had finally been granted a moment's peace. Our mother, in a gentle attempt to console us children, insisted that Abba was merely suffering from a nervous condition and would recover soon, God willing. But who could truly fathom the depths of his anguish?

The Fall of Delhi haunted me time and again, and I couldn't help but think that Abba was right. The plight of Indian Muslims didn't end with the Fall of Delhi; the Fall of Dhaka was just another painful chapter in the same ongoing narrative.

One day, as if by fate, a new issue of 'Sadaq-e-Jadeed,' a publication from Lucknow, found its way into our lives. Desperate to offer Abba some solace, some relief from the weight he bore, I attempted to read a passage from the newspaper aloud. "What is this?" he asked, the words 'Sadaq-e-Jadeed' barely registering. And then, almost without care, he probed, "What does it say?"

I recited the first few lines, the words heavy with history and loss. "In 1924, it was not a non-Muslim, but Mustafa Kemal who dismantled the esteemed institution of the Caliphate, leaving the entire Muslim world to stand by, helpless and distraught. In 1948, after just three days of resistance, the Asafiyah Sultanate's flame was snuffed out. That same year, the state of Israel emerged, and now, the next link in this tragic chain materializes in the form of the establishment of Bangladesh and the dissolution of United Pakistan."

But before I could continue, I noticed Abba's eyes, glistening with unshed tears. "Leave it," he whispered, as if to shield himself, "There's no use mourning these things now." Sensing my worry, he tried to reassure me, "Don't fret, I have a nervous condition, sometimes plagued by bouts of anxiety. When I was your age, I once fell chest-

first onto the road while running. The impact on my heart back then still haunts me from time to time."
I knew, in some unspoken way, that Abba was naturally tender-hearted. He couldn't bear the sight of animals being slaughtered for sacrifice. The bloodshed and brutality in East Pakistan weighed heavily on his soul, and yet he clung to hope. But now, as the unity of Muslims faced a crushing blow, he could no longer keep his composure. And so, with a heartrending innocence, he sought to hide his pain behind childhood memories of falling and injuring his chest.

The day when Abba's delicate health became somewhat known, Master Yaqub decided to pay a visit, concerned for his well-being. Abba held him in high esteem, and upon his arrival, he managed to sit up. After exchanging formal pleasantries, the two older men simply gazed at one another for a handful of moments. A palpable, heavy silence blanketed the room, as if they both sensed the pain residing in each other's hearts. It was then that Yaqub shattered the silence, speaking with a somber tone, "Hafiz Sahab, I was bedridden for three or four days, unable to grasp what I should do. I had read about the history of the fall of Baghdad and Granada, but now, the true brutality of this historical process has revealed itself to me. However, clarity emerges from the haze: regardless of how many celebrations may take place, Bangladesh remains a Muslim-majority nation, and it will inevitably find its way back to its roots."
"It's undeniable that with Pakistan's division, a new Muslim-majority nation has emerged on the world stage. Eventually, when our adversaries grasp this reality, their aspirations will be drenched in disappointment."
"But for the time being, they are under the impression that they've exacted revenge for a millennium of Muslim rule by fragmenting Pakistan."
"Indeed, there is a toxicity in their words. They feign to be the great allies of Muslims, yet beneath the surface, they conceal a myriad of treacheries. I hadn't anticipated such duplicity from Nehru's daughter, but can we assign her blame when there are those among us who applaud her efforts? Observe the Urdu newspaper editors who so

eagerly lent their support to her cause, echoing her devious intentions."
"People of this nature have always existed, but the influential Urdu newspaper editors stand steadfast. The government is aware that regardless of their vulnerability, Muslims cannot stomach an assault on their unity with apathy."

In a world swirling with uncertainty, Master Yaqub's voice cut through the dense air, longing for a Muhammad Ali-esque figure to rise among Muslims and provide support to the Muslim Ummah during such tumultuous times. Silence draped itself over the gathering like a heavy cloak, allowing thoughts to marinate and emotions to brew. After a pause that seemed to stretch into eternity, Master Yaqub reignited the conversation, inquiring about the latest issue of 'Nidae Millat' and the curious report contained within.

The response was tinged with an undertone of regret, admitting that no such opportunity to peruse the issue had presented itself. Master Yaqub, undeterred, shared the gist of the report – a tale of conspiracy woven by the Muslim World League, revealing that Israel had planted three Zionist agents in East Pakistan to foment rebellion amongst the Bengali people against West Pakistan. The report even implicated Rehman Subhan, a respected Bengali economist, in a clandestine meeting with Daniel Cohen in Paris. While 'Nidae Millat' remained tight-lipped with its own opinions, the report hinted at the depths to which this conspiracy delved.

The conversation meandered towards an article in 'Shabistan,' the mention of which piqued Yaqub's curiosity. The topic? The prophecies of Shah Nematollah Vali. With a nod of acknowledgment, Yaqub allowed the conversation to progress.
However, the sudden realization that I had intruded upon the discourse of my elders washed over me, filling me with a sense of shame for my impertinence. Eager to make amends, I gathered the tea cups and retreated from the gathering, leaving behind a wake of introspection and speculation.

7
The jubilee year

On one hand, the hearts of Muslims ached from the fall of Dhaka, while on the other, celebrations across the country continued to grow. As Indira Gandhi stepped into parliament to announce victory, she was showered with praise. Atal Bihari Vajpayee went even further, declaring her an avatar of Durga. Muslims, however, felt increasingly alienated. They couldn't fathom how they were supposed to participate in these national celebrations.

During this turbulent period, it was announced at school that the government would celebrate the Silver Jubilee of Independence. The wound of Dhaka's fall was still raw, fueling anger. I wondered if there was a deeper meaning I didn't yet grasp, my heart and mind in turmoil.

One day, I read in a recent issue of 'Sadaq-e-Jadeed' that the genuine cause of Muslim grief and anger was that Bangladesh's independence and separation from Pakistan were generally viewed as a victory against Muslims. Disrespectful and provocative slogans were raised against them. Their dissatisfaction also stemmed from their belief that this war was fought primarily to disintegrate Pakistan. Our Ministry of Information, which swiftly eradicates all sorts of propaganda, had not addressed the Muslim community's grief and anger in a timely manner.

My young mind couldn't comprehend that this war was waged solely to separate East Pakistan from West Pakistan as retribution for the thousand-year rule of Muslim rulers. How could the Ministry of Information remove this impression?

At times, I wondered if there was some profound truth in these thoughts. Then it occurred to me that our teachers must have also felt the community's pain, so I joined the Silver Jubilee committee with this in mind. According to the program, various competitions would take place throughout the year, classrooms would be decorated, and one day, all seventh-grade students would don special uniforms to

participate in the Silver Jubilee Parade alongside students from other schools in the city and towns.

In that pivotal moment of my seventh-grade year, our class was granted the honor of taking center stage in the school's parade. We were consumed by extracurriculars, with students bustling about, scheming and planning for various tasks. It was in the midst of this frenzy that we received word of a shipment from Bangladesh arriving at the Rotary Club, its contents offered at astonishingly low prices. "You know, Shano snagged a brand-new cricket bat for a mere eight annas, and even got a gleaming leather ball for free," Khurshid whispered, conspiratorially. The assortment was vast, and perhaps it remained a secret to most, for if word had spread, the crowds would have been overwhelming. I wasn't enticed by the cricket bat, but the mention of looted Bangladeshi goods ignited my curiosity.

The Rotary Club was but a stone's throw away from our home, so in the evening, a few of us ventured forth. Mountains of clothing overflowed on the veranda, and an array of household items and used goods lay haphazardly strewn about. The truly valuable items had likely already been claimed. My eyes were drawn to a cream-colored achkan (a traditional coat-like garment), and I was struck with awe. "Oh, this looks just like Uncle Jilani's achkan, the one we keep exposed to sunlight as a keepsake of his memory," I mused. I gingerly picked it up, examining it as if it contained some hidden link to the past. But then I saw it—bloodstains. A shiver slithered down my spine. It felt as though we had trespassed into a slaughterhouse. The chilling tales from East Pakistan came to life before me: a tricycle, a pink frock, and a single, minuscule sock. I yearned to pick it up, but my courage faltered. I wondered whose tricycle this was, how tenderly it must have been purchased, perhaps for the girl in the pink frock. I had no idea if she still breathed or had been cast into the merciless jaws of death.

Millions had perished; they must have worn and used something. Innocent children among them must have pleaded with their parents

for various things. These items were but a fraction of the scattered relics in the veranda. Who could know the fate and condition of their original owners? The world may never learn the truth. Who will tell the stories of these elders and children, their belongings now abandoned amidst this chaotic landscape?

In the past, when I read of the multitudes slain in nine months of brutal conflict, the staggering numbers seemed an abstract game. Yet today, as the earthly possessions of the deceased materialized before my eyes, they began to weave the tales of their original owners' hardships. The stories were so vivid that the blood-soaked soil of East Pakistan seemed to shimmer anew in the eyes of my imagination.

As the excitement of Independence Day celebrations amplified in school, a peculiar sense of chaos began to seep into the classrooms. Beyond our school's borders, the city's distinguished medical college resided, cloaked in an air of mystery. One day, on a whim, I joined some friends on an impromptu expedition to the hallowed halls of the college, our curiosity piqued and eager for adventure.

Stumbling into a dimly lit chamber, we were met by the unnerving presence of two preserved corpses. The room was thick with the biting scent of chemicals, and an ominous atmosphere pervaded the air. As I gazed upon these lifeless beings—eerily reminiscent of ourselves—a shudder of horror and trepidation crawled down my spine. I found myself wondering about the identities of these forgotten individuals and the merciless fate that had led them here.

Suddenly, the memory of those objects at the Rotary Club came rushing back to me, dragging me once more into the nightmarish days haunted by the image of a decapitated child. It was in this moment, with the embalmed bodies providing a macabre backdrop, that the full extent of the slaughter was revived. And again, my ears were filled with the ghostly, enigmatic murmurs of a past that refused to be silenced.

In the midst of this turmoil, my father's illness began to cast an even darker shadow. One day, a cold struck him like a relentless fever. He

was a man who typically healed himself, but as the fever raged, our worry swelled. We weren't used to seeing him confined to a bed, weak and helpless. Ultimately, we decided that professional medical treatment was necessary.
Despite my father's protests, he finally succumbed to our pleas and agreed to see a doctor. He must have known it was a mere cold, but our persistence wore him down. The medications prescribed were as varied and vivid as the emotions they stirred within us. The fever subsided, but in its wake, it left a path of frailty and complications we couldn't ignore.

The doctor made another appearance, this time filling our table with a veritable pharmacy of pills and potions. As he left, he whispered cryptic advice to the family, enveloping the house in a cloak of uncertainty. The secret remained hidden from my father and us children. Still, I managed to catch wind of the dangerous diagnosis, the fleeting days that were all that remained of his life.
My father, ever the fighter, insisted he was fine. He continued to take the medications, succumbing to the pressure of our concern. But the drugs proved treacherous, ravaging his body with sores and lesions. It was then that he reclaimed control, halting the medications and seizing the reins of his life once more. He declared he was not ill, that the doctor had missed the mark, and with that, the struggle to live carried on.

The days stretched on, and the wounds that adorned my father's body began to fester, painting a mosaic of pain across his chest, back, and wrists. He'd managed to keep the emotional wounds from the fall of Dhaka a secret, hidden behind a veil of stoicism, but these physical scars were not as easily disguised. We tried every salve and balm we could find, but all were futile attempts to alleviate his suffering.

It was on a sultry afternoon, in the midst of our family bookshop, that my father, overcome with anguish, whispered his mantra in times of distress, "Ya Musabbebul Asbab," invoking the Creator of causes. At that moment, a stranger appeared, seemingly from nowhere. His attire

suggested he was a peasant, carrying an umbrella in one hand and a small bundle in the other, from which a simple cloth sack was tied.

Witnessing my father's torment, the stranger offered a peculiar suggestion: to apply a paste of red chili to the open wounds. He assured us that within days, the sores would heal. We recoiled at the thought, the mere idea of red chili on raw flesh sparking a sense of dread. But as we stood there, desperate for relief, we couldn't help but consider this seemingly divine intervention.

With tentative hands, we applied the fiery paste to my father's wounds, and, to our amazement, the pain subsided almost immediately. It was as if a soothing balm had replaced the fire, and within days, the wounds began to heal. Life within the bookshop, once shrouded in pain and uncertainty, gradually returned to normal, and the enigmatic stranger's remedy lingered in our minds as a testament to the unpredictable nature of life and healing.

At last, the day we'd all been anticipating finally arrived at school. The thrill of the speech and writing competitions had been in the air for months, and the pleasure of taking part in the sports events was hard to deny. However, the prospect of participating in the parade was an entirely different beast. Just the idea conjured up images of the robotic left-right march, the thunderous footfalls of young police officers, and the piercing voice of the captain – all of which made me feel a unique sort of estrangement.

That fateful morning, I arrived at school decked out in the designated uniform of a crisp white shirt and blue shorts, only to be utterly horrified to find all my classmates dressed the same. It was as if my very individuality had evaporated into thin air. Our school had no tradition of uniforms; everyone wore whatever they fancied, a delightful expression of our own personal styles. However, now and then, we would catch glimpses of small groups of prisoners donning a specific uniform as they went for their morning walk. This was my first experience of what I'll call the "uniform of freedom."

As if things couldn't get any worse, we were lined up according to our class roll numbers, and in order to ensure none of us would be lost in the sea of thousands of students en route to the polo field, our roll numbers were pasted unceremoniously onto our backs. Each of us had to proceed in this exact order, like little soldiers. Some teachers were appointed the dreary task of keeping watch over the sequence of these numbers. My roll number was thirteen – unlucky for some – and at first, I was downright outraged that a front-row student like myself had been relegated to the thirteenth spot in line. Whenever I'd fall behind, I'd hear a shout, "Hey, where's number thirteen? Pick up the pace!" Other times, it'd be: "Tell that kid with number thirteen to stay in line!"

In school, my teachers had always treated me with a certain tenderness, and even in my father's gatherings, no one would scold me when my playful student antics crossed the line of decorum. But today, I couldn't shake the deep distress that gnawed at me, knowing that in this parade of freedom, I'd been diminished to nothing more than "the boy with number thirteen."

Somehow, the captives of liberty found themselves amidst the exuberant celebration on the polo ground. The atmosphere was electrified with a sea of students, their faces beaming, and the area adorned with vibrant balloons and flags waving passionately. In this grand spectacle, the boy bearing the number thirteen faded into insignificance. Reluctantly, the boy took his place in line, listening to a series of speeches – some comprehensible, others lost in the cacophony. India, it seemed, had finally emerged as a great nation, its power and military prowess the topic of heated discussion in recent months. The fall of Dhaka had left Muslims bewildered and confused, feeling alienated amidst the celebrations.

Weary of the uninspiring and boring speeches, the boy with number thirteen returned home, his heart heavy with the burden of feeling insignificant. It was as though this celebration of independence was designed to pour salt into the wounds of his battered national pride.

He was not even granted the permission to shed tears for Jilani Uncle, lest he be considered an opponent of freedom.

Feeling utterly helpless, he wondered about the fate of Jilani Uncle and his family – their current condition, whether they were still alive, and the hardships they must have faced. If only someone could convey to them that in the midst of these celebrations, shedding tears for their suffering was a forbidden act.

8
Healing Hearts

When the clamor of the celebrations finally died down, it became painfully clear that a significant shift had taken place within the country. Reports of riots from Aligarh, Firozabad, and Banaras were not merely anti-Muslim outbursts; they were blatant attacks on Muslims by weapon-wielding police forces. The unsettling truth surfaced when a local Congress leader, who would sometimes grace our bookshop with his presence, showed up one day visibly shaken. His voice, laced with despair, revealed, "What unfolded in Firozabad and Banaras was nothing short of a one-sided police crackdown. Charan Singh has gone on the record, stating that it's unjust to label this as Hindu-Muslim riots. The police singled out and targeted unarmed Muslim protesters. The other party, which is usually accused, wasn't even part of the equation."
As his words spilled out, Uncle Abbas's voice quivered, and his eyes brimmed with tears. Struggling to maintain his composure, he implored, "Hafiz Sahab, what on earth do we do now? The very ones we leaned on have started to let us down."

An elderly person, with an air of both wisdom and concern, noted that Indra was consumed by anger, unable to fathom why the Muslims hadn't thrown their full support behind the attack on East Pakistan. As they sat within the warm embrace of a bookshop, the elder attempted to dissect the complexities of the situation.

What more, they wondered, could have been done? The most illustrious leaders of the Muslim world found themselves ensnared in a tangled web of deception, unable to free themselves from the shadows of this monumental tragedy. Those who dared to speak out could only suggest that the Prime Minister should have directly engaged with the Pakistani President to resolve East Pakistan's issues. Some mused that perhaps it would have been better if East Pakistan had never been separated, while others cautioned against the repercussions of intervening in the East Pakistan affair, as it might inadvertently

provide justification for foreign powers to bolster the emerging movement in Tamil Nadu.

As the conversation unfolded, the bookshop seemed to hum with the echoes of history, the weight of the past bearing down on them as they grappled with the complexities of human conflict and the search for understanding.

"This, indeed, is the plight of us Muslims. The government seeks our unwavering loyalty, demanding heroes like Veer Abdul Hamid to rise from our ranks. Yet, when the time comes to savor the fruits of our labor, we are gently reminded that key positions cannot be granted to us, for fear of offending the majority's delicate sensibilities," he lamented.
At these words, Uncle Abbas, a man with an aura of quiet dignity, adjusted his white Gandhi cap and responded, "Your grievance rings true. In Bihar, whenever the prospect of a Muslim Chief Minister arose, individuals like Abdul Qayyum Ansari and Dr. Mahmood—despite their vast contributions—found themselves marginalized. We acknowledge this injustice, but what recourse do we have? There seems to be no alternative for Muslims."
"A new path will emerge, provided you stand together in solidarity. Consider, for instance, the likes of Dr. Faridi from Lucknow."
"Are you referring to Dr. Abdul Jalil Faridi?"
Abdul Jalil Faridi—blessed with a fire that burns brightly in his eyes—seems to possess an unyielding determination. He stares down adversity, daring to challenge the powers that be. Uncle Abbas, catching wind of the words lavished upon Dr. Faridi, felt an uncomfortable flicker deep within, as if his long-standing convictions were being scrutinized. With a sigh, he conceded, "The elders must make the decisions. We're nothing more than common folk, powerless. The weight of responsibility is theirs to bear."

But are the elders truly capable when they find themselves ensnared in a battle that seems doomed from the start? Consider Abdul Qayyum Ansari, a leader who doesn't simply blend into the background. When Mr. Cripps inquired of Nehru about the Muslim leaders capable of

standing toe to toe with Jinnah and advocating for their community within Congress, he singled out Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Husain Ahmad Madani, and Abdul Qayyum Ansari. And yet, this distinguished leader now faces the indignity of being denied a ticket in Bihar. Though he once wore his displeasure like a badge, it evaporated the instant he was granted a seat in the Rajya Sabha. If only leaders of his ilk could summon the audacity exemplified by Dr. Faridi, Congress might find itself trembling with apprehension.

Uncle Abbas conceded, "You have a point. Congress senses the simmering discontent among Muslims, and maybe that's why they're hell-bent on crushing their resolve before it gains momentum. The crackdown on Muslim protesters in Aligarh, Firozabad, Banaras, and other places serves one purpose: to drive home the message that Muslims must stay tethered to Congress's leadership in their political journey or be prepared to pay a hefty price."
"But whatever the cost, there's no alternative for Muslims except to walk in the footsteps of Dr. Faridi—may he be protected." With those words, the elder's voice trembled with a visceral intensity, and he raised his gaze skyward, as if pleading his case of vulnerability to the divine.

Among Dr. Faridi's admirers, there was this intriguing elder, often present at the bookshop's evening gatherings, where conversations mingled with laughter and the smell of ink-stained pages. His real name remained a mystery to most, but he was fondly known as "Compounder Sahib." Having retired from the railways, he found solace in his practice within a Muslim neighborhood and the vibrant discussions at the bookshop.

He was a man with a sharp wit and a knack for humor, effortlessly weaving his words into stories that left the listeners amused. One day, he playfully questioned a respected Maulana about his birthmark, causing the latter to bristle with indignation before realizing it was an innocent inquiry into his birthplace.

Sometimes, Compounder Sahib held a copy of the newspaper 'Qa'id' and would say, "Look, see what 'Qa'id' has to say," leaving one to

wonder whether he referred to the newspaper or the esteemed Dr. Faridi himself.

But then, there were days when darkness seeped into the room, the air thick with frustration and anger. He recounted the horrors faced by Muslims in various places, the fires spreading, consuming lives and homes. He pulled out a piece of paper, scribbled with red ink, as if the ink itself was bleeding. He listed the atrocities and questioned the motives behind them, his voice shaking with despair.

What does this woman want? Does she intend to attack every Muslim neighborhood like she did in East Pakistan? How much blood will this witch consume? And as the words lingered, the room felt heavier, burdened with the weight of unspeakable pain and unanswered questions.

Seeing Compounder Sahib so agitated was startling. He often engaged in light-hearted conversations, infusing charm and wit even into the most serious intellectual environments. Today, however, there was a flicker of fear in his anger-filled eyes. He lamented, "The city's situation keeps deteriorating. Dr. Faridi barely raised his voice, and this woman began her crusade against Muslims. Since she took control, the situation has become increasingly precarious."
Zaki Sahib shared his somber analysis, "The situation was never ideal, but at least when people like Nehru and Azad were alive, there was a glimmer of hope. Their eyes held compassion, and now the very Muslims whose votes brought Congress to power are being oppressed shamelessly."

Abba expressed his thoughts, "In his final days, Azad saw himself as a defeated man. He used to say that nobody listened to him. When he granted Darul Musannefeen a government aid of fifty thousand rupees, it caused a major uproar among some people." After a brief pause, he continued, "Poor Azad, what could he do? In a divided India, his voice became lost. Do you remember those enchanting slogans?" He locked eyes with Compounder Sahib and continued, "What does Pakistan mean? There is no god but Allah; if you're a Muslim, come join the Muslim League, sing the songs of unity with passion. People

couldn't grasp the deception behind this unnatural plan of Pakistan. It would divide Islamic India into three geographical parts, weakening their influence in the days to come."

Zaki Sahib nodded solemnly, "Indeed, who could have known that a day would come in divided India when Muslims would be forced to protest for the protection of their language and identity?"

Yet protests are what vex her; she's agitated because the Muslims dared to dissent. She desires to hold them in bondage. Compounder Sahib elucidated further, remarking, "Dr. Faridi has penned this matter with remarkable clarity. He's detailed the date, locale, and reference to that very meeting in which Mrs. Gandhi assured Muslims that, upon securing electoral victory, she'd guarantee the preservation of Muslim University's minority status and the Urdu language. But her actions? Quite the contrary. The university was subsumed by the Ministry of Education, and when Muslims voiced their indignation via public rallies, bullets were unleashed upon them. Sixty-six souls perished by police gunfire in Firozabad alone. It's an absolute travesty." Compounder Sahib shared his disquiet.

"It's our belief that Muslims themselves shall bear the brunt of these demonstrations."
"What, then, shall we do?" inquired Compounder Sahib.
"A singular path exists: calling people to God," Zaki Sahib, a steadfast reader of the newspaper 'Dawat' and an ally of the Jamaat-e-Islami, proclaimed as he gazed at Compounder Sahib.
He continued, "The significance of 'Dawat' in beckoning people to God is undeniable, but the route shall be illuminated by 'Quaid,' shan't it?" As he spoke, he gestured toward the folded newspaper 'Quaid' clutched in his hand.
Dr. Faridi's earnestness is unimpeachable; he's a valiant soul. Prior to the formation of the Muslim Majlis, he's witnessed the duplicitous machinations of non-Muslim political factions. Yet, a lurking peril exists—that the clerics encircling him may once more compel him to be beguiled by Congress. Congress's deception eventually unveils its painful reality, but with the clerics' chicanery, one remains oblivious to

when and how the calamity transpired. Uttering this, Compounder Sahib bade farewell.

The turmoil stemming from the unrest in and around UP had seeped into the city, casting its shadow over the inhabitants. Each day, whispers of new rumors circulated, suggesting that Hindus were conspiring to attack Muslims in various neighborhoods, amassing weapons for their nefarious plans. Our living quarters were connected to the bookshop, nestled in the bustling market area near the district administration and police offices. Yet, the very police that were meant to protect us posed the most significant threat, having directly attacked or orchestrated assaults on Muslims in several UP cities.

Non-Muslim residences surrounded us, placing us on the front lines of this brewing conflict. Despite the mounting tension, the Muslim neighborhoods throughout the city prepared for resistance. However, their makeshift weapons of sticks and batons would prove futile against the might of the armed police forces. The city's elders implored us to relocate to a predominantly Muslim neighborhood, but my father staunchly believed that abandoning our post would signal defeat and weaken the resolve of our fellow Muslims. We decided to stay put and face the challenges head-on.

Our home was filled with relics passed down from our ancestors, including an antique German lamp and a Zulfiqar-like sword. The latter's significance became apparent in the face of impending conflict. Some of us busied ourselves with polishing Zulfiqar to a gleaming shine, while others meticulously listed knives, cutters, and other household items that could double as makeshift weapons. Drawing from the historical novels that filled our shelves, we pieced together a strategy for defensive warfare. As children, we immersed ourselves in these preparations, fueled by a combination of fear and determination.

My father's anxiety grew with each passing day. At times, he would offer us reassurances, uttering "Insha'Allah, nothing will happen," while in other moments, he would lose himself in prayer, beseeching, "O Allah, You are the Causer of causes." As the luster of Zulfiqar intensified, so too did the fire in our eyes. We shared tales of the sword's legendary prowess and spoke of the valiant warriors of

centuries past, envisioning ourselves joining their ranks on the battlefield. With one Zulfiqar and numerous Alis at our side, we felt the weight of our collective strength and resolve steadily growing.

Each day, we were inundated with fresh rumors, whispers of fear and uncertainty that permeated the air. Tales of ghouls and attackers slithering from the city's northern edge at night, their sinister presence casting a pall over our lives. Friday night attacks were the talk of the town, and as night fell, we came to understand the true length of sorrow's twilight.

From Maghrib to Isha, moments lingered like epochs, each second burdened with the weight of centuries. Isha's call to prayer finally resounded, but it seemed hollow, void of its usual vigor. This sacred summoning, once a beacon guiding the faithful to salvation, now felt as if it were sinking, drowning in despair. Was this the final call? After tonight, would there be anyone left to invoke God's greatness in this city? And yet, deep within our hearts, a flicker of hope stubbornly persisted, whispering that God would not abandon us.

The night stretched on, its silence oppressive and haunting. The distant echoes of screams and cries sent shivers down our spines, shaking our innocent hearts. And somehow, we endured this seemingly endless night. With the aid of Zulfiqar and the divine protection of the Lord of Zulfiqar, we managed to navigate the perilous waters of fear and uncertainty. It appeared as if our enemies had lost their resolve, abandoning their sinister plans of attack.

Though the threat of violence had receded, our hearts and souls remained scarred from those harrowing twelve days. Daylight brought little respite, for each step we took outside carried with it the unshakable dread of an unseen dagger's thrust, or a stray bullet that might snuff out our existence. Our eyes would fall upon Zulfiqar, the rusty sword, and we'd ponder how long we could continue transforming our nights into mornings with its meager support. We

had escaped this time, but should circumstances persist, it wouldn't be long before the sun rose in this land without us.

I found myself reminiscing about a gathering in a Muslim neighborhood where an elderly man, his voice rich with wisdom, spoke fervently about the unity of Muslims. I had been sent by my father as his representative to attend a wedding, an entirely new experience for me, and one that left me feeling out of my depth. The sheer number of attendees was overwhelming, as if the entire neighborhood had come together in a vibrant whirlwind of color and sound. When the hosts caught sight of me, they treated me with special respect, ushering me into the assembly of distinguished guests as if I were an elder myself. There, the leaders of the community were engaged in passionate discourse about the unity of the believers. As I listened, it dawned on me that the true focus of this gathering was not the upliftment of the believers but the revival of 'Momin conference'.

A white-bearded elder, adorned in a khadi kurta with a guide-badge, emanated an air of dignity, and his eyes, framed by a Gandhi cap and refined glasses, hinted at a life spent in the service of the nation and the community. Though his name escaped me, the people called him Doctor Sahib. When he spoke, the room seemed to pause, as everyone hung on his every word.

He spoke of the importance of maintaining unity, for it was this unity that had compelled the government to finally pay attention to their needs. He talked about new schemes for bankers and approved loan projects for power looms, of reservations for underprivileged classes opening new opportunities. Their efforts were directed toward convincing the government to buy products directly from them, particularly with the potential for large-scale yarn supply to the police and military.

As he spoke, the elder acknowledged the challenges ahead, but his voice was resolute. They would do what they could for the government, and in turn, the government would do something for

them. The key was unity: the power of their collective vote would be felt if it were cast for the Congress party. He cautioned against the voices of dissent and negativity, reminding the gathering that their elders were well-versed in navigating the complexities of such interests. It wasn't for everyone to take up the mantle of leadership, he said; true progress could only come from unity and perseverance.
And as I sat there, surrounded by the fervor of these impassioned voices, I felt the weight of the responsibility placed upon me, not just as my father's representative, but as a member of this vibrant, striving community.

As the conversation meandered and swelled, one gentleman, with an air of respect and grace, broached the subject of the Congress party's leadership and the shifting dynamics regarding Muslims. Doctor Sahib mused, "These issues are not veiled from our discerning gaze; our venerable forebears are vigilantly monitoring the evolving landscape. We ought to contemplate the future, seize opportunities from government initiatives, and now, rather than weaving sheets and lungis, you folks should craft fine-quality yarn, enabling our cooperative society to supply it directly to the police department at an attractive price."

The bespectacled man, adjusting his glasses, inquired skeptically, "For whom, my good sir? Doctor Sahib! For whom are you spinning this yarn? For the selfsame police who, given the slightest opportunity, become insatiable in their thirst for our blood? They'll repose on our woven creations before assailing us with renewed zeal and vitality. What a peculiar scheme you've devised!"
Doctor Sahib might not have anticipated this line of dissent. He countered, "Ah, brother, you misunderstand; we're creating yarn for them, not firearms."
Yet the bespectacled man persisted, "But we bestow upon them a weapon far more perilous than guns—our invaluable vote. In doing so, we willingly grant them dominion over us. Once you've entrusted them with your affairs, why wouldn't they toy with your Islamic pride,

demean you at their whim, and even should you protest this state of affairs, remain utterly unfazed?"
"Ah, brother," Doctor Sahib sighed, "we too are disheartened by this reality, and rest assured, our esteemed elders are not merely sitting idly by. After all, I too have journeyed through life; the ebb and flow of fortunes is inherent in the realm of politics."

"You haven't considered Mrs. Gandhi's remarks on the Firozabad issue. Sixty-eight Muslims tragically fell to police gunfire. N.G. Gore, a Parliament member, candidly expressed to Mrs. Gandhi the extent of the atrocities committed against Firozabad's Muslims, including looting, gunfire, arson, violating Muslim women's honor, and most shamefully, the government machinery's complicity with the culprits. And Mrs. Gandhi's response? She naively believed the Commissioner and Inspector General of Police's explanations, insisting that the allegations against the police were baseless. Her dismissive tone towards Muslims, as she disregards our pain and pleas, is disheartening. And yet, you suggest that Muslims should continue to vote for them en masse—merely for scraps of bread? I struggle to make sense of it."
"Anyway, now's not the time for such discussions; dinner is served," Doctor Sahib interjected, attempting to quell the conversation that was turning against him.
Inwardly, I mused that while Doctor Sahib might be a prominent figure in the community, the bespectacled man's poignant words devoured all of Doctor Sahib's guidance and wisdom, much like Moses's staff consuming the sorcery in an instant.

9
Seeking Truth

Today, I found myself reminiscing about the secret police officer who, once upon a time, had wandered into the bookstore, nose twitching, trying to detect any hint of an impending riot. He had shared his concerns with my father, who, to his surprise, revealed that we had no intention of relocating despite the precarious circumstances. "And what will you do if the situation spirals out of control?" the officer inquired. My father, in his trademark nonchalance, responded, "Death is a celebration of pain."

The secret police officers seemed to be regular visitors of the bookstore, and in the process, some of them would even befriend us – or at the very least, act as though they had. What was unmistakable, however, was the persistent sensation of being scrutinized, our every move and gesture closely observed. Though the gatherings at the bookstore were focused on intellectual freedom and the exploration of grand ideas, these discussions proved unbearably threatening to those who sought to stifle the thoughts and opinions of Muslims in the country.

Eventually, wearied by the relentless pursuit of the secret police, my paternal uncle reached out to Zakir Sahib, who had recently been elected President. Following his intervention, the once aggressively watchful demeanor of the police officers faded, granting us a much-needed respite from their unwavering gaze.

During my father's illness, we discovered he had woven a vast tapestry of sincere and caring Muslims, stretching far beyond our immediate surroundings. Day after day, visitors would arrive to inquire about his well-being, many of them unfamiliar to us. They hailed from diverse sects and beliefs, united by a common anguish - the urgent need to safeguard their faith and religion. This shared struggle was the very crime that subjected us to the torturous vigilance of surveillance. The concept of freedom in a divided India was a privilege solely known to those who lived it.

In our household, my father would often have us, his children, read translations and commentaries of the Quran to him. Perhaps this was his method of research, or maybe it served to nurture our upbringing. One day, as I recited Surah Al-Baqarah, I reached the verse: "When death approached Jacob, he said to his sons... what will you worship after me?" My father stopped me mid-sentence, his silence hanging heavily in the air, as though he yearned to express something. I read the translation to him, but he dismissed it with a weary sigh, murmuring, "It's a huge responsibility." I recognized that there must be a deeper meaning, one that eluded my comprehension at the time.

Back then, certain parts of the Quran were published for children under the title "Tafsir for Children." Yet, even so, grasping the Quran's knowledge remained an elusive challenge for young minds. The traditional method of reading the Quran, which focused solely on recitation without understanding, barred me from completing it as many other children had. This left a void within me, a gnawing dissatisfaction that urged me to study the holy book on my own. It dawned on me that perhaps my father's concern lay in the preservation of our thoughts and faith.

During those days, I happened to read a historical novel about the Morisco Muslims of Spain. In this novel, there was a boy about my age who found himself perplexed by some of his parents' thoughts and ideas. He had a nagging feeling that they were keeping certain things hidden from him. Within their home, there was a secret room where his father would frequently disappear.

One fateful day, the father summoned the boy into this hidden room and spoke with a heavy heart, "My son, you are nearing the age of maturity, and there is a burden weighing on my soul. I long to share it with you, but you must promise to keep it locked away as our secret."

The boy, eager to prove his loyalty and sincerity, reassured his father, "I swear by Jesus Christ, Father, I will not tell a soul."

The father's eyes brimmed with tears as he revealed, "My dear son, this Christian facade we wear is not a true reflection of our religious identity. We are victims of a coercive system that has forced us to embrace Christianity. Deep within our souls, we remain Muslims, and

now, perhaps the time has come for me to pass the torch of our true faith onto you."
As I read this, I couldn't help but wonder if my father had been subtly hinting at a similar trust, a legacy that he too wanted to pass down to me.

In both Spain and India, Muslims held sway in a magnificent display of power and opulence, stretching across seven centuries. The question arose: what link does the history of Andalusia hold for Indian Muslims? And could the looming decline of the Urdu language follow a path akin to the slow dissolution of the Arabic language in Spain? I pondered whether to consult Master Yaqub, a man who, in his unique way, managed to inject even the most somber subjects with the enchantment of a tale.

Yet, extracting those precious gems of wisdom from Master Yaqub wasn't always a straightforward endeavor. He would first assess the level of knowledge the inquirer possessed on the topic and then carefully tailor his response to suit their understanding. However, if the seeker demonstrated a familiarity with the subject matter, Master Yaqub's countenance would brighten, and his conversation would flow as gracefully as a cascading waterfall. With this in mind, I approached Master Yaqub, eager to explore the connections between the histories of Andalusia and Indian Muslims, as well as the potential parallels between the fates of the Arabic and Urdu languages.

Upon hearing my query, Master Yaqub's eyes glistened with intrigue, as though he was lost in the labyrinth of memories, the dusty corridors of history. He began to weave a tale, rich in its melancholy, and yet, laced with an unyielding spirit. In a voice laced with the sorrow of forgotten voices, he recounted the tragic story of the Moriscos, Muslims who had been forced to conceal their identities behind a veil of Christianity. Their hearts continued to beat to the rhythm of their faith, their beliefs etched deeply into their souls, even as their lips recited prayers to a different god.

With a hint of a smile, he spoke of the resilience and courage of the women who guarded their sacred texts like fierce lionesses protecting their cubs. The Quranic verses became a part of their very being, hidden within the folds of their clothing, and nestled close to their hearts.

And then, as if he were revealing a secret long kept in the shadows, Master Yaqub shared the ingenious plot that had been hatched by the Moriscos to safeguard their beloved language. The Lead Books of Granada were crafted with great care, like delicate flowers that bloomed under the moonlight, revealing the splendor of their petals. They were scrolls of lead, bearing the teachings of Jesus Christ in the elegant curves of Arabic script, a testament to the mutual respect shared between two faiths.

The discovery of these scrolls sent ripples of awe and wonder through the Spanish landscape, causing a profound shift in the perception of the Arabic language. Once scorned and despised, it now became an object of fascination, a key to unlocking the mysteries of the past. In this way, the Moriscos managed to nurture the delicate flame of their heritage, keeping it alive even in the darkest of times.

I turned to him, my eyes wide with curiosity. "Didn't the Christian world make a fuss about this?" I asked, my voice trembling with emotion.

He sighed, a weary look in his eyes. "What good would making a fuss do? Sure, the Christian scholars in Rome claimed time and again that the scrolls couldn't be authentic in terms of their teachings. But, you see, when something catches fire among the people, it's impossible to quench. This matter, it became intertwined with Spain's national pride. And so, the Christians of Granada, they found themselves with a unique message from the Virgin Mary in the Arabic language. It was politics, and the Lead Books ushered in a fundamental shift in their attitude towards Arabic."

My thoughts raced, my heart pounding. "So, should Urdu speakers adopt a similar strategy?"

He shook his head, his voice soft and thoughtful. "The situation with Urdu is different. It's not our only religious language, and more than

that, it's our shared language. Hindu poets and writers, they've contributed to it for centuries."
My hands clenched into fists as I asked, "Then why try to eradicate Urdu? What about Chakbast, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Diya Shankar Naseem, and Ram Babu Saxena, the author of the history of Urdu? Can't they see these people?" I was desperate, drawing upon my bibliographic knowledge.
He frowned, a sadness etched upon his face. "Prejudice, narrow-mindedness, that's all it is. These unfortunate souls, they've convinced themselves that Urdu is solely the language of Muslims. The truth is, there are economic motives at play. After independence, Urdu schools vanished, leaving Muslims in the dust. Hindus, well-versed in Hindi script, they thrived in government jobs, institutions. Now, they want to strip our new generation of their rich Islamic heritage in Urdu."
My voice cracked as I asked, "Why didn't Muslims stop this conspiracy at the outset?"
"They tried," he replied, his eyes downcast. "But Muslim leaders, they were no match for the deceit, the trickery."
"What about Maulana Azad?" I whispered, my heart aching.
He sighed, his shoulders slumped. "Poor Maulana Azad, who would listen to him? Gandhi once promised him that the new India's national language would be Hindustani, neither Urdu nor Hindi, written in both Arabic and Devanagari scripts. But what happened? Urdu was banished, and Hindi was awarded official patronage."
"And the movement to make Urdu the second official language?" I asked, hope flickering in my heart.

He looked at me, his eyes filled with resolve. "Let's see what comes next. Muslims, we don't give up easily. We've got connections in this country, people who speak one way and act another. First, they shut down Urdu-medium schools, removed Urdu from government offices, and now they claim to want to promote it. The story of Urdu in divided India is a dark, twisted saga of betrayal and deception."
As I stepped away from Ya'qub Sahab's gathering, memories of the historical novel washed over me. In its pages, a boy my age endured an avalanche of tribulations within a handful of years – a story so

poignant that tears would often escape my eyes. Following the fall of Granada, Muslims valiantly fought for the sanctity of their faith for a century and a half, maybe even two. Initially, they faced forced conversion to Christianity, and later, laws designed to strip them of their language and culture. Speaking Arabic, possessing Arabic books at home, embracing Arab customs, donning Arab attire, and even the simple act of bathing daily like the Arabs – all were deemed unlawful. As life grew increasingly unbearable, they were granted permission to emigrate, relinquishing their assets in exchange. But the system, cruel and unyielding, demanded a heart-wrenching condition: they must abandon their young children to the mercy of the government. The system justified its stance, arguing that since these children were officially Christian and baptized, the state could not entrust their education and upbringing to Muslim parents. The souls of these families were left to languish, torn apart by the relentless grip of the system.

The image of little five-year-old Fatimah swelled in my thoughts, an innocent caught in the clutches of a cruel fate. Her father's voice cracked as he whispered a heart-wrenching goodbye, "Fatimah, Ma'as Salamah." He knew that after today, nobody would ever call her by her beautiful Arabic name again. As I read the novel, I struggled to hold back tears, wiping them away time after time. I couldn't help but wonder about the unimaginable agony those parents must have endured. Many mothers, in their overwhelming despair, chose suicide, taking their precious children with them. Others courageously raised the flag of rebellion, but all efforts were futile. The Christian rulers of Andalusia had one goal in mind: to mold a generation of Muslim children who would be completely disconnected from their rich history and true identity.

As these thoughts cascaded through my mind, I realized the truth in Ya'qub Sahab's words. The leaders of the new Hindustan are determined to erase the Urdu language so they can create a rift between the upcoming generation of Muslims and their magnificent historical heritage.

The memory of the Urdu language brought to mind the conference held at the town hall, where, despite my tender age, I had the privilege of sitting on the stage among esteemed guests. As the night progressed, passionate speeches echoed through the hall, and the air resonated with slogans like "We will reclaim Urdu's rights." After the event, I found myself seated in the car reserved for guests, en route to dinner at Shoaib Manzil. I couldn't help but feel humbled by the presence of Ghulam Sarwar, the editor of the newspaper "Roznama Sangam," who happened to sit next to me. Who would have noticed a novice like myself among these distinguished elders?

As the conversation unfolded, I discovered that the conference in Darbhanga was, in fact, part of a larger campaign to promote Urdu across the province. I had already perused Ghulam Sarwar Sahab's jail diary, "Gosha Mein Qafas Ke," and I was an avid reader of his newspaper, "Sangam." That evening at the town hall, I was captivated by his fervent speech. Like many successful speakers of that era, his oration was rich with synonyms and an eloquent cascade of names and words. The audience was left spellbound, mesmerized by the lyrical beauty of his speech. For instance, with remarkable finesse, he would mention a river and then proceed to list the names of all the rivers both domestically and internationally. Similarly, when discussing flowers, he would enumerate their names so exquisitely that the listeners were left enchanted, the crowd exclaiming, "Wow! Subhan Allah!" It was as if he was weaving poetry within his prose, a captivating experience.

After the speech, as I mingled with the guests at the evening gathering, I was struck by the epiphany that public speaking is an art form in and of itself, one that demands a unique blend of training and dedication. Sarwar Sahib departed for Patna, but he left behind an air of grand plans and revolutionary ideas. The city hummed with talk of the conference, and it was evident that the Urdu-speaking community would not back down easily. A massive protest was scheduled, but

before the Urdu Demands Day procession could set off, Bhai Jaan was unexpectedly arrested.

The evening air brimmed with the anticipation of Shab-e-Barat. As the sweet scent of treats permeated the neighborhood, children scurried from one house to another, distributing their festive delights. Our home was not one for making sweets, but to prevent the children from being enticed by the tantalizing aromas wafting from neighboring feasts, our mother would prepare Zarda Pulao on such occasions. The Shammi Kebabs she crafted by hand were an unparalleled treat, and we would eagerly await mealtime as their mouth-watering scent filled our home. But Bhai Jaan's sudden arrest cast a somber shadow over the festivities; the once delightful food and carefree evening now seemed dull and lifeless, and no one had the heart to eat or drink. The police station loomed ominously just a few steps away. We visited the police station in shifts, each time returning with updates to soothe our worried mother. The night dragged on, sleep elusive as we fretted about what the future might hold. Our father's recitation of "Ya Musabbebul Asbab" continued uninterrupted. Through prayer and faith, Bhai Jaan was released the following day.

At the time, Bhai Jaan was an intermediate student who had already published a substantial Urdu literary magazine called "Tawazun." He was also the driving force behind the All Bihar Urdu Conference in Darbhanga. His abrupt arrest marked the first time I grasped the dangers of fighting for one's language and culture in this country. I had often heard my father discuss the 1967 Ranchi riots, which were orchestrated to suppress the Urdu movement. I was a firm believer in enduring the greatest hardships for religion and was willing to make sacrifices, but the notion of facing imprisonment for the sake of language was something I struggled to understand. This led me to wonder if I should seek Yaqub Sahib's guidance on whether our language truly warranted such sacrifices, and if we were indeed duty-bound to withstand hardships for its preservation.

One day, Master Yaqub made an appearance at my bookshop, perhaps to extend his empathy in light of the recent events. He spoke with a profound depth, "Language, you see, is an intrinsic part of our identity. It intertwines with our culture, thoughts, beliefs, and religion to form the tapestry of our being. Should someone's language be stripped away, it leaves them a mere shadow of themselves. If their culture and faith follow suit, what remains? A hollow, mechanistic shell, akin to an animal. And, do understand, language shares an intimate bond with citizenship."
"In what way?" I inquired, curiosity piqued.
He sighed, "It's a delicate subject, but allow me to elucidate: in the absence of language, a person is not only rendered incomplete, but also an incomplete citizen. Language imparts the art of discernment, providing a conduit for thought and a means to voice opposition to that which we find disagreeable. To deprive us of our language is to leave us bereft of thought and expression."
At the time, Master Yaqub's discourse eluded my full comprehension. Still, I began to grasp the notion that our struggle for the Urdu language was intimately entwined with our national and religious identity. My father was wont to say that, though many succumb to the yoke of circumstance, not all do. A rare few stand steadfast, do battle, and ultimately alter the course of events. His aspiration was for us to belong to those who resisted, even to the bitter end.

Amidst the fervor of the Urdu movement, our school stood as a beacon in the town, nestled in its very heart. It was the sole Urdu-medium institution administered by Muslims, proud of their religious identity. The annual gatherings of Bazm-e-Urdu brought a palpable excitement to the Muslim neighborhoods, as they eagerly organized prizes for written and oral competitions. Prominent figures from the town chose their favorite topics for the writing competitions, often announcing their own unique awards well in advance. It seemed as if the Muslim community felt a deep-rooted connection to the school and its affairs.
Inside the school, the sciences were taught exclusively in Urdu, even going so far as to list laboratory items in the native language. For instance, when creating a list of necessary items for experiments such

as filtration and distillation, a thermometer would be referred to as "آلہ مقیاس الحرارت" (device to measure temperature). This unwavering dedication to the language sometimes presented difficulties during board exams, where non-Urdu-speaking examiners struggled to recognize the Urdu names for scientific instruments. Yet, despite these challenges, the lively spirit of the Urdu language and literature thrived within the school, a vibrant oasis in an ever-changing world.

As the proposal for Urdu Language Day emerged, our school became consumed by the preparations for this revolutionary undertaking. There was an agreement that, on this occasion, countless letters would flood the President's office, demanding the elevation of Urdu to the status of a second official language in Bihar, where numerous Urdu-medium schools still thrived. Students formed small groups, sitting before towering piles of postcards, penning heartfelt missives with fervor.

Initially, our spirits soared, believing that our collective efforts in letter-writing would compel the President to enact a groundbreaking decision. However, Abdul Rashid, ever the realist, dampened our spirits by stating that if mere letter-writing could manifest such significant change, Urdu would have already secured its place as an official language. He argued that the government was well aware of the desires of the Muslim community, and our letters would only benefit the postal department. In his view, our zealous letter-writing campaign was an exercise in naïveté.

Mehtab chimed in, agreeing with Abdul Rashid that we might be unwittingly playing into the hands of the postal department. Observing the letter-writing campaign succumb to despondency and disillusion, I couldn't help but interject.

"Look," I said, "not everything should be measured by gains and losses. When these thousands, if not millions, of letters from different cities and various hands reach the President, it will create a ripple effect from the smallest post offices to the largest ones in Delhi. People will wonder about the sudden influx of letters, each postcard bearing a distinct style of writing, where we have poured out our hearts. Our

demands, our anger, and most importantly, our awakening as Urdu speakers are all contained within these letters. We have become conscious of our democratic rights, and life has returned to us. Abdul Rashid, our letters are not lifeless scraps of paper, but rather lamps of courage that have been ignited, and now they cannot be extinguished."
I attempted to persuade him in an impassioned, oratorical manner. He relented, acknowledging my point but maintained that the true test would come on Wednesday, during the procession. Only then would we see how many people would participate in our movement.

On a Wednesday, the school held a gathering of students, an assembly where they shared the significance of the procession, the path it would take, and various safety precautions. They discussed which slogans should be chanted and what responses would follow each. With a basic understanding of these matters, we made our way to Madrasah Hamidia Qila Ghat, forming a silent procession along the way.
As we reached our destination, processions of Urdu enthusiasts arrived from all corners, like an unstoppable flood of passionate souls, brimming with energy and fervor. Banners proclaiming our dedication, such as "We will take the rights of Urdu," waved proudly in the air, and spirited slogans like "Our language is famous all over the world" echoed through the streets. In the midst of fiery speeches and sky-shattering chants, our procession of Urdu devotees advanced toward the Collectorate. Although the majority of our route wound through Muslim-populated neighborhoods, we were aware of potential hostility in some non-Muslim areas. But we, the supporters of Urdu, stood prepared to confront any adversity.

As our procession passed by my bookshop, I found myself with a microphone in hand, leading my classmates in enthusiastic chants. It was then that I noticed my father's gaze, a mixture of delight and astonishment painted on his face. Overcome with embarrassment, I discreetly handed the microphone to a friend and retreated into the sanctuary of my bookshop.
The Collectorate building loomed nearby, and it was there that our procession reached its poignant conclusion.

10
Eyes on Alert

As the nation teetered on the edge of chaos, an air of unease had settled over the land. The fervor of Bangladesh's independence had now morphed into a widespread disquiet. A tangled web of war expenses, famine, and a hateful campaign against Muslims only served to fuel the fires of unrest. Those who once praised Mrs. Gandhi as a divine incarnation in their fight against Muslims now brazenly defied her.

Everywhere, strikes and blockades emerged like stubborn weeds, and the scarcity of essential items prompted a surge in hoarding. The streets painted a somber picture: queues of hundreds snaking behind kerosene tankers, lines of people patiently waiting for soap, matchboxes handed out here, and cigarette packets there. The city had become a veritable tableau of desperation.

Police, in their efforts to maintain control, charged at the restless queues with batons. As the struggle to obtain basic necessities intensified, people resorted to looting trucks even before lines could form. The nation found itself submerged in a sea of anarchy. At night, the defiant sounds of drums and cymbals would echo through the neighborhoods; the clanging of spoons and plates rang out as people united in protest.

Guided by the venerable leader Jayaprakash Narayan, the cry for a total revolution swelled, ever-present and unyielding. It was as if every corner of the country resounded with the same demand: "Vacate the throne of power, for the people are coming."

In the midst of the final exams at school, the country found itself on the brink of an emergency. One morning, I discovered my father steeped in a pool of anxiety, an unusual sight. The nation was, indeed, experiencing a declared state of emergency. On my way to school, I couldn't help but notice clusters of people engaged in hushed conversations at different locations. The concept of an emergency eluded me at first, my mind preoccupied with the weight of exams.

Upon returning home, an array of Urdu and English newspapers adorned the bookshop, one of which bore the headline: "Emergency Declared." A few days later, news emerged that 26 organizations, including Jamaat-e-Islami, had been outlawed, and fundamental rights suspended. My father offered a fervent prayer, his countenance shifting from anxiety to a semblance of serenity.

Days continued to pass in a similar fashion until the news broke that my uncle had been arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). The source of my father's anxiety became evident. Soon after, my cousin Jamil bhaei appeared at school while I was immersed in my exams. He called me outside, informing me of my father's arrest and the complete sealing of the bookshop. He advised me to head to Islam Nagar instead of going home after the exams. The thought of my father arrested and separated from us delivered a gut-wrenching blow, and I found myself unable to hold back tears. Friends attempted consolation, but the high, menacing walls of the jail I'd frequently pass on morning walks haunted my thoughts.

Initially, I struggled to comprehend how everything had spiraled so suddenly. It seemed that they had been waiting for my mother to leave the house to take advantage of her absence, sealing not only the bookshop but our residence as well. My mother, although worried, remained steadfast in comforting me. "Every night is followed by a morning," she'd say. "Don't worry, circumstances will change."

In the aftermath of our semester exams, their importance seemed to fade as we confronted a new and daunting reality. Books were left untouched, and clothes remained locked away, as if we had been suddenly cast out, exposed and adrift. My mind couldn't help but wander to Abba's well-being, and the thought weighed heavily on my soul. Tears seemed endless, but amidst my grief, I would remind myself that those who tread the path of truth are destined to face adversity. I recalled the countless nights Abba raised his hands in prayer, finding solace in the darkness, and how God would undoubtedly hear his supplications. The belief that he wouldn't be

forsaken brought a fleeting sense of comfort, only for a thick haze of worry to envelop me once more.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, my brother arrived, bearing the weight of the news: Abba had been arrested, and our bookshop shuttered. He was still held captive in the police station, destined for jail after his court appearance the following day. We could visit him, he said, if we so wished. So, as the evening prayers called out, we found ourselves within the cold confines of the police station.
There was Abba, his prayer mat spread upon a cot, lost in communion with the divine. It was as if he were praying the Tahajjud, whispers to the heavens in the darkest hours before dawn. Finishing his prayer, he caught sight of us and beckoned us closer. "Fear not," he said, "place your trust in Allah, for He is the architect of our lives. Do not let your studies falter; all shall be well, God willing. This storm, too, shall pass."

As he spoke these words, his hand came to rest gently on my back. In that moment, it seemed as though his touch infused me with a strength hitherto unknown, as if the clouds of sorrow and despair that loomed overhead had suddenly begun to disperse.
Until then, I had barely managed to hold myself together, but as his words washed over me, I felt the sting of tears, hot and unbidden, brimming in my eyes. I bent down quickly, feigning the need to adjust my sandal, and surreptitiously wiped my tears with my sleeve, lest Abba should see my grief. I gathered my wits, and as a bastion of patience and fortitude, I sat before him, that our resilience might lend him strength in the face of adversity.

Throughout the restless night, a kaleidoscope of thoughts and doubts danced upon my heart and mind. At times, I felt swallowed whole by the agonies of confinement, and at other moments, I'd find a strange solace in the memory of my father's enigmatic calm and composure during our meeting at the police station. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I surrendered to sleep.

In my dream, my father appeared, perched beneath a tree on a platform, cradling his beloved copy of Hamail Shareef that he'd so often recite from. Attendants encircled him, and a motley crew of people, decked in beautiful clothes, lounged on ornate chairs. Among them, I recognized a few familiar faces that frequented the bookshop. This ethereal place was nestled near a waterfall, a sight I had always adored just before sunrise. That's when my father would conclude his recitation, tenderly wrap up his Holy Quran, and we would embark on our morning walk together.

The sight of my father in this divine place, at that liminal moment before dawn, ignited my heart with joy. I thought to myself that our walk today would be nothing short of transcendent. I sprinted towards him, but before I could reach his side, I awoke. Dawn was still a distant dream. Despite my best efforts, sleep eluded me. Yet, I took solace in the thought that my father was happy, content, and had found a place among the celestial inhabitants, worthy of his exalted status.

A thought fluttered into my mind that he might be seeking his treasured copy of the Quran. Carrying this thought, I ventured to the bookshop in the morning, only to be met with crushing disappointment as I found it shuttered, with an armed guard standing sentinel, forbidding anyone from approaching.

The following day unfolded in a haze of mental anguish. On one side, there was my father's court appearance, where he faced accusations of sowing dissent within the country, and on the other, our family confronted the shattering prospect of educational disruption for us, the six siblings. Thus far, those who had dared to assist the detainees amidst the emergency found themselves ensnared in the peril of arrest. In this climate of trepidation and unease, the majority of our relatives and close friends opted for self-preservation, averting their gaze.
As we were in the throes of devising our next steps, a soul-crushing piece of news reached us: my father's younger brother had been arrested as well, as if the circle of despair had finally closed in on itself.

All the men in the house were shackled, leaving us wondering who to turn to for help. When earthly supports crumbled, it was nature's plan that emerged. A neighbor, who admired and befriended my father, insisted we move into their home while our bookshop remained locked. The prospect of living next to the bookshop again uplifted our spirits.

We relocated without delay, bringing with us no furniture or possessions. Our essentials were trapped within the bookshop and the adjoining residence, guarded by armed men morning and night. It was our first experience of life without life's necessities. Despite the desolation, my mother orchestrated the new home in a way that fostered an environment of patience, gratitude, education, and learning.

We endured a week of mental distress. Throughout that time, news of my father's imprisonment trickled in from various sources. Eventually, we learned that the jail authorities had fixed Wednesdays for prisoners under the Defence of India Rules (DIR) to have meetings with their relatives.

On a sweltering Wednesday, we reached the jail at the appointed hour. It was somewhere around half-past two or three in the afternoon, with the monsoon heat at its zenith. The air was suffocating, heavy, and oppressive. A series of three window-like doors graced the main entrance to the jail, solid iron bars suspended within. A wall, set at a distance from these doors, maintained a ten to twelve-foot gap between prisoners and visitors. The wall itself was a mere three to four feet tall.

Outside, visitors thronged the area; inside, prisoners crowded the iron-barred windows. The cacophony of so many voices, each striving to be heard, melded into an indecipherable din. Our eyes searched, restless and hopeful, for our father. But he remained hidden from view, and we continued to stare at the windows, a mix of anticipation and trepidation consuming us. Suddenly, our father appeared. He seemed to be trying to say something, but his words were lost amidst the noise or perhaps stifled in his throat. Distress etched his face, his eyes reddened, as if from sleepless nights.

Seeing him in such a state tore at our hearts. I had been elated at the prospect of meeting him, of wrapping my arms around him, offering encouragement, and sharing how our educational pursuits had not only continued in his absence but exceeded expectations. I'd imagined his delight, the warmth of his embrace, the reassuring pat on my back, and the gentle touch on my forehead - a touch that would breathe new life into me. But the reality of the meeting was a torment. I lifted my younger brothers, Shahid and Murshid, to show them to our father. On both sides, longing gazes were exchanged, the air heavy with deprivation, helplessness, and an indescribable sorrow. At times, it manifested as tears in our eyes or in the choked voice of our father.
Our mother, the personification of despair and hopelessness, observed this heart-wrenching scene from behind her veil. She bore witness to the injustice of innocent children being denied their father's touch even during a meeting. Though she longed to speak, the clamor surrounding us made it impossible. And so, our first prison meeting concluded, steeped in helplessness and the bitter taste of deprivation.

My mind churned with unease as I returned home, haunted by the image of my father's sleepless eyes, swollen from what I could only assume were endless tears. In my heart, I'd silently plead, "O Allah! Ease my father's burdens in his prison cell." Our father was our sun, around which our extended family orbited; he sat at the center, always there to inquire about our well-being and support us without hesitation or reservation. He was a beacon for the vulnerable, the struggling Muslims, the determined youth, and those yearning for success beyond the confines of family. People from all walks of life sought his advice on personal and social issues. With his sudden incarceration, the delicate web that connected us all began to unravel. Safekeeping, potential support—it all came to a screeching halt. The government accused him of sowing chaos in the country, but those who knew him, those with the poetic Persian temperament, would speak of his quiet assistance and grace in such a way that a celestial image of our father would emerge. We had inklings, of course, but the full extent of his impact only became apparent after his imprisonment. Hearing the stories of peasants and visitors from far and wide, both

acquaintances and strangers, it seemed as if they were all bound in a strong spiritual relationship with our father. We didn't know that our father was the guardian of such a large family and that his family was so large before this.

As I returned from the visit, I was engulfed by a profound sense of sorrow. My intention had been to stand before him as a pillar of strength, assuring him that we, as a family, had embraced this challenge with determination and courage. We were at peace with our fate, unyielding in the face of adversity. Yet, upon seeing his face, my emotions spiraled out of control, and I couldn't help but shed a few tears. I vowed that, in our next meeting, I would not appear weak or helpless.

My thoughts turned to my father's oft-spoken wisdom – he believed that life without lofty goals and noble aspirations was tantamount to death. The distinction between humans and animals, he said, lay in our capacity for thought – without it, we were no better than the beasts of the field. He frequently reminded us that we were no ordinary people; we were chosen by God, blessed with divine favor. As Muslims, we could not shirk the heavenly responsibility bestowed upon us.
Now, my father languishes behind prison walls as a result of his convictions – an honor, in a way. But it's a tragic honor, one that has rendered those with special connections to the divine utterly helpless and powerless. My father never sought aid from anyone but God; ever since I can remember, I've seen him gazing skyward in times of trouble. So why, then, has God seemingly abandoned him? I recalled the verses of Hali, which I once recited joyfully, earning praise and rewards from my elders:

O chosen, among divine envoys, the hour calls for prayer,
As thy people grapple with time's enigmatic snare.
That faith, with grandeur once, from homeland did emerge,
Now in distant realms it dwells, upon the brink of verge.[xiv]

The bookshop remained under the heavy guard of the police. Every time I tried to get closer, the stationed soldier would stomp his boot on the ground, producing a sharp, ticking sound. His face was devoid of any emotion, like a mechanical robot. Although police squads often patrolled the area due to the presence of administrative offices and police lines nearby, and we used to occasionally visit their campus for sports or just to hang out, their demeanor used to be generally friendly towards children. But the emergency had deprived them of even basic human decency. With each ticking sound of his boot, it felt as if my heart was being crushed. The bookshop, where my memories of day and night were attached, my gathering place and my learning center, where my days and nights were filled with joy and insight, the very bookshop for which I had bid farewell to the never-ending celebration of village life, we were now being evicted from it. As I was looking at the bookshop with a longing gaze, filled with sorrow, I saw my old school friend Sameer passing by. I called out to him, and he looked back for a moment, but for some reason, instead of stopping, he quickened his pace. He said, "My father has forbidden me from going to your house." Sameer was my old friend, an admirer of Abdul Qayyum Ansari. He used to participate in speech competitions and engage in passionate discussions about national issues. I was shocked by his sudden avoidance, and it felt as if my soul was deeply wounded by his betrayal. But Sameer was not alone in his behavior. The enforcement of emergency had suddenly made the world around us unfamiliar. People would whisper words of sympathy, and some brave souls would even ask about my father's well-being, but their role was essentially that of spectators. They were not ill-wishers, but they also lacked the courage to be well-wishers. On the whole, our relationship was with these spectators, who were watching our plight today with their empathy and good intentions. Although they were not against justice, they were also not standing with it. Who would explain to them that not supporting justice is, in fact, opposing it?

The next couple of visits to the prison unfolded with the same emotions, the same sense of helplessness that clung to us like a heavy fog. Yet, somehow, it started to feel like the new normal. On one

particularly sweltering monsoon day, a man came to our house after the Friday prayers. He had the aura of a scholar, wrapped in a turban and robe even amidst the oppressive heat. His bicycle was a canvas of miscellaneous items - a breakfast box, a leather bag, a bundle of clothes, and a packet of books.

There was something magnetic about the man, his bushy henna-dyed beard and heavy-framed glasses commanding a certain level of respect. He shared that he was the prison's imam, a poet known as "Raahi," and had just visited my father after the prayers. It felt as if some celestial force had sent an angel to console us. We gathered around him, hungry for every morsel of information about my father's wellbeing and daily life. He reassured us that my father was in good health, but his eyesight had been compromised due to excessive crying, perhaps because of cataracts. He needed a large-print Quran.

As we conversed, my brother brought forth a glass of refreshing sherbet. By now, the imam had grown comfortable in our company. He lamented the state of the world, where innocent people found themselves unjustly imprisoned. He recited a poem he had penned, and we listened, captivated by his talent and melodic voice. He told us stories of life in the jail, as if to lessen our dread and unfamiliarity with the place. He was, after all, still under investigation.

He spoke of the prison's overcrowded conditions and the regular observance of Friday prayers. However, sometimes there would be no one to lead the prayers. Once, he had to attend a village wedding, so he decided to lead the Friday prayers on Thursday, unwilling to wait. We were amazed by his innovative approach – Friday prayers on a Thursday? He explained that in jail, the significance of Friday prayers was merely a formality. Some even believed that establishing Friday prayers was entirely out of place and irrelevant under non-Islamic governments.

And so it was, every Friday, Rahi Sahib made it his ritual to grace our home after his return from jail. Through his unwavering efforts, the

fickle hands of fate had cracked open a window from the prison cell into the very heart of our dwelling. With the arrival of a pristine copy of the Quran adorned with clear script, Abba's dependence on the Hafizi Hamail Sharif ceased, perhaps liberating his understanding of the sacred text that had once been shackled. Now, fleeting moments of respite gifted him a new, transcendent pleasure in recitation and an insatiable thirst for contemplation, unbound from prior intellectual confines. His days and nights became an intricate dance of God's words and intimate conversations with the divine. Maybe it was the reverberations of his laments and pleas that, even in his absence, we felt cradled in an unseen embrace, as if the tender mercy of God ceaselessly cast its protective shadow over us.

One day, the postman appeared bearing a mountain of letters, newspapers, and parcels – an accumulation of mail from the past three or four weeks. Among them were missives from traders and inventories of books that had journeyed through transport, now eagerly awaiting their recipients. We'd been receiving notifications of book bundles from the railway warehouse before. It sparked an idea: why not venture into opening a new bookstore alongside the existing bookshop? In a blink, a fresh bookshop materialized in the outer section of our abode. We took turns tending to it, and upon our return from school, our newfound diversion became engaging with customers. As if by divine intervention, the moment the shop opened its doors, ethereal visitors began to arrive. It was a peculiar sight to behold, as people would come seeking the very books available, especially in the afternoons following our return from school, when a flood of customers would pour in. It seemed as if their presence was not by mere chance, but rather orchestrated by some higher power, perhaps God Himself having assigned them this sacred task.

In a blink, the unassuming little shop morphed into a new bookshop, as if the emergency had left our lives untouched. Slowly, the rhythm of life began to find its beat again. Amidst this transition, our laundress reemerged unexpectedly, bearing bundles of laundered clothes. "Where did you vanish to?" my mother chided. With a bashful

demeanor, she replied, "What could I do? I'd heard that anyone attempting to see you would be arrested by the police." Relieved, my mother eyed the clean laundry and murmured, "This is all God's orchestration."

The birth of the new bookshop sparked a rejuvenated sense of self-assurance within us. Our home once more buzzed with impassioned discussions about education, the grandeur of Islam, and our collective thirst for knowledge. My mother, with her extraordinary knack for management, preserved an air of purity and simplicity in the face of scarce resources. Mornings were filled with the melodic resonance of her recitations, evoking a feeling that our old routines had been restored. Though my father's absence from this scene was palpable, God had cracked open a window for us in jail through the Imam of Friday prayers, allowing us, with perceptive eyes, to keep him within our sights.

11
Tasteless Freedom

Now, we had adjusted to the days and nights of the emergency. The bars of the jail and the watchful eyes of the guards no longer struck fear into our hearts; instead, they inspired us to contemplate how we might shatter the darkness of this seemingly endless night. In school, a clandestine committee formed among a handful of friends, tasked with taking careful, secret steps toward a brighter tomorrow. On the occasion of Independence Day, there was a customary flag-raising ceremony at the school. We agreed to arrive early on August 15th, so that we could engage in meaningful discussions before the flag ascended.

As planned, I arrived at the school, only to find NCC students practicing their parade while the headmaster and a few teachers sat in the veranda adjacent to his office. A transistor radio sat on the table, everyone eagerly listening to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's speech, broadcasted from the Red Fort. Sensing the delicacy of the situation, I offered a silent greeting and respectfully took a seat on a nearby bench. Mrs. Gandhi's words echoed through the air, saying that, like every year, we had gathered at the Red Fort for the flag-raising ceremony, but this time it was different. The entire nation was participating in the event through television. As she explained the significance of the national flag, she recalled an elderly leader who once asked, "What is this flag? It's just a piece of cloth." And while it may be a piece of cloth, it was that very cloth for which millions of freedom fighters had sacrificed their lives and lost everything they had. This cloth symbolized the strength of India, and that's why we bowed before it. We must always hold this piece of cloth in high esteem, for it is dearer to us than life itself.

She continued, asserting that freedom was not a magical solution that would instantly eradicate poverty. Freedom had opened a door for us, ending centuries of oppression. As she explained the merits of

freedom, she emphasized that it didn't mean everyone could do whatever they wanted; rather, we had been given the opportunity to fulfill our responsibilities.

As her speech continued to echo in the air, an unsettling thought blossomed in the recesses of my mind. What could she possibly mean by 'centuries of oppression'? This land hadn't been plagued by centuries of tyranny, had it? The British merely waved their flag over the Red Fort for ninety fleeting years before making their exit. To what enduring oppression could she be alluding?

A few years prior, on the momentous occasion of Bangladesh's independence, she had raised the specter of retribution for a millennium of Muslim rule. And now, here she was, ascribing the celebration of Independence Day to the lifting of some centuries-long burden. Could she be envisioning a free India in the same vein as the Spanish Reconquista?

My thoughts were hijacked by vivid images from that novel about Muslim Andalusia, painting a poignant picture of the aftermath of Granada's fall. Initially, Muslims were assured the right to practice their religion without hindrance. Yet, in the blink of an eye, the situation took a dramatic turn. A brutal government edict forced them to forsake their cherished culture and faith, culminating in the utter annihilation of Muslims from Andalusia within a mere century.
Back then, it was the iron will of the Spanish princess Isabella that drove the merciless purge. Today, it is Pandit Nehru's own daughter who casts the golden era of Indian Muslims as an age of relentless oppression.

In the midst of the flag-raising ceremony at school, my thoughts repeatedly wandered to that novel, drawing parallels between the enigmatic figures of Isabella and Mrs. Gandhi. I pondered the peculiar nature of the freedom we were celebrating—a freedom wherein our fathers and family elders were imprisoned while we were indoctrinated to carry on our prescribed roles. It seemed to elude their

comprehension that this vaunted freedom, which fractured our Islamic unity into three disparate parts, was a festering wound for us. How could those with loved ones still in chains find joy in this blood-stained celebration of liberty?

This year, the crowd at the school's Independence Day gathering seemed larger, likely due to the shadow of the Emergency looming over us. After the ceremony, students dispersed into various activities; cricket and football games emerged amidst the chaos. Our clandestine meeting seemed an impossibility under such circumstances. Wisdom dictated we postpone it for a more opportune moment. As I made my way home, I learned of the assassination attempt on Bangladeshi President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. A small church along the path had drawn a crowd listening to the news on the radio. The shocking revelation was that Sheikh Mujib, along with his entire family, had been brutally murdered in a military coup. It seemed like a fleeting moment ago when Sheikh Mujib journeyed from London to Dhaka to assume the reins of the newly-independent Bangladesh. Known as the "Friend of Bengal," I struggled to comprehend the rationale behind his abrupt and brutal demise, particularly on the anniversary of India's Independence Day. The world seemed to be unraveling, leaving me to question the very nature of the freedom we were told to celebrate.

One day, a whisper of hope spread through our neighborhood: some of the prisoners held by the DIR had been granted bail by the High Court. We, too, had submitted our appeals, yet the only response we received was a never-ending string of dates, extending up until the beginning of Ramadan. With this new development from the High Court, our spirits lifted, and we hoped that the lower courts would follow suit and make their decisions with haste. This glimmer of hope sustained us through most of Ramadan.

It was the last day of fasting, the morning air still cool and crisp, when we heard that the moon had been sighted the previous night. As a result, Eid prayers were being held in some areas, while others staunchly observed the last day of fasting. In search of confirmation, I

wandered towards the Grand Mosque, just a short distance from our home. The imam sat outside his chamber on a chair, a thick book sprawled open before him as he appeared lost in its pages. Today, he chewed on a betel leaf, perhaps a sign to the faithful that fasting was no longer necessary.

Outside the mosque, people gathered in small clusters, heatedly discussing why Eid prayers were not being offered if fasting had come to an end. The imam, unconcerned by the disputes that buzzed around him, would cast a triumphant glance at the newcomers before sinking back into his studies. Upon noticing me, he asked after my father and explained that someone should make it clear to these people that once the moon has been sighted, there is no justification for fasting. However, he assured me that the prayers would take place the following day.

The thought of offering Eid prayers without my father was like a bittersweet melody that tugged at my heartstrings. This mutual disagreement and the resulting diluted joy of Eid made me feel as if everyone's celebration, much like my own, had been clouded by a sense of loss.

New dates kept emerging, like faint glimmers of hope in a seemingly endless darkness. At first, we believed that Abba's release would be just around the corner, but as months drifted by, we became numb to these fleeting, deceptive promises. With hearts heavy with disappointment, we would tell inquiring minds that the matter was under consideration and we could only wait to see the outcome. Then, like a sudden burst of sunlight through the clouds, we heard that the court had ordered the reopening of the bookshop and our associated residence, with the expectation that Abba's release would soon follow some official proceedings.

Prayers whispered on trembling lips, the bookshop doors opened once more, but it was a ghost of its former self. The recent floods had wreaked havoc, tearing apart the very fabric of the library and our residence, leaving behind a scarred, broken shell. The outer walls had crumbled, and nothing was left intact or in its proper place. Yet,

government officials insisted that we acknowledge receipt of everything in a safe and preserved condition. In the suffocating grip of a prevailing atmosphere of oppression, what choice did we have but to comply?
With the police operations complete, we turned our weary hearts and minds toward securing Abba's release, a goal that shimmered in the distance like a mirage, tantalizingly close yet still so far away.

One day, returning home from school, I found Abba sitting in the courtyard, his face a portrait of stillness. Resting his chin on his right hand, he gazed at the heavens as if searching for answers among the clouds. Seeing him there, so unexpectedly, I hesitated, unsure of how to greet him. I offered my salutations and took my place on a nearby bench. He asked after my well-being, a formality reminiscent of our conversations through prison bars, and then his eyes returned to the sky above.

Abba seemed to be grappling with the weight of unspoken thoughts and emotions, a silent symphony playing behind his eyes. Sometimes it appeared he was trying to process the changes that had occurred in his absence, and at other moments, he marveled at how life's brutal experiences had made his children so sensitive and serious. A quiet melody seemed to play on his lips, a song of sorrow that occasionally brought tears to his eyes.

Drawn to Abba in his contemplation, I moved closer, reaching out to touch him – a simple gesture of connection that had been denied to us in prison. Memories of those heart-wrenching visits washed over me, and I wondered who could ever forget the shadow that incarceration cast over our lives. The children of prisoners are bequeathed a unique kind of torment, one that grants them a perspective invisible to others.
As I stood there, pondering the emotional burden we all bore, it became clear that our lives would forever be marked by the scars of Abba's time in prison. The unspoken bond we shared was a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, even in the darkest of times – a

defiant whisper of hope, rising above the cacophony of sorrow that had become our everyday soundtrack.

Abba was released from prison, but the prison within him refused to leave. Jail had changed the course of his life. After a few days of silence, the knot of his expression finally unraveled, and he realized that even after his release, he was still imprisoned – trapped in the prison of a divided India. His conversations now seemed like an endless echo of the Muslim's struggles, from the assassination of Uthman to the fall of Baghdad, from the collapse of Istanbul to the fall of Delhi, and then the fall of Dhaka. Listening to these stories felt like experiencing a historical narrative laced with the pleasure of a tale. When he spoke, it seemed as if history was being woven into each word – a history imbued with wisdom and insight. When news of Abba's release became public, people began to visit him. Everyone wanted to know the story behind the prison walls. One gentleman, well-known in the activist circles but who had somehow managed to avoid imprisonment, came to see Abba one day. He casually said, "Congratulations on finally acting on the Yusufi example, and tell me about the truth behind the flag issue in jail. I heard it sparked quite a battle."

"Maulvi Sahib, won't you grace us with a visit inside the jail? How long will you just watch from the sidelines?" Abba's voice rang out, the playful lilt of his words filled with curiosity. He continued, "I think everyone should experience jail at least once in their life, if only to rid their heart of fear."
In this peculiar world of confinement, a diverse array of individuals found themselves thrown together: communist leaders, self-proclaimed socialists, RSS flag bearers, and those with ties to Jan Sangh. At first, each remained in their own bubble, insulated from the others. But as the days and nights wore on, the sameness of our existence prompted a need for entertainment, and various programs emerged to fill the void.
One evening, following a shared meal, it was decided that we would all passionately sing the national anthem. Everyone knew my daily routines and practices, but my participation in this group event posed

a dilemma. Perhaps some had intended this outcome, the hidden mischief of zealots lurking behind the suggestion.

The ward was divided: everyone else on one side, and me, standing alone. They accused me of disrespect for not joining them in standing for the anthem. As the debate escalated, some of our Muslim friends urged me to let the matter go. After all, what harm could come from a two-minute act of unity?

But I refused to budge, insisting that it was a matter of principle. I couldn't relinquish my freedom to these people, even within the confines of the jail. I was determined to live life my way, no matter how unpalatable it seemed to others. When it became clear that I wouldn't be swayed, a leader from the socialist party intervened, attempting to defuse the situation: "Maulvi Sahib is devoted to his worship. If he chooses not to participate, let him be. There's no need to create unnecessary conflict."

Someone said, "No, what kind of talk is this? They must participate, as this is a matter of the national anthem." The room swirled with confusion, emotions spilling over like a stormy sea. A tall man, a lighthouse amidst the chaos, cut through the noise with an anger that was as magnetic as it was frightening. He didn't think the attitude of the people was right. "I see that you all are bothering a decent and gentle man. If he doesn't want to participate in the national anthem, that is his right. How can we force him? Don't you know what Jayaprakash has said about national symbols?" The man spoke with a passion that seemed to burn like a fire, illuminating the true nature of the situation.

Nehru had said that if anyone disrespects our country's flag, they should be shot, but then Jayaprakash said that the flag is just a piece of cloth; we can make another one, but the life of a young person is precious and if we lose it, it will be lost forever. The tall man's words reverberated through the room, a tidal wave crashing down on the opposition. The balloon of opposition, once so full and ready to burst, now deflated, leaving behind a hollow, defeated shell. More voices rose up, a chorus of support that echoed through the air. Some argued that they should cancel the program that would create differences among them, as national symbols are meant to unite people, not divide them.

The room was filled with a cacophony of emotions, a symphony of dissent and understanding.
A young man, who was probably a student leader, began to say that Jayaprakash was right; the politics of national symbols has caused much harm to the country. He said: "Once, Jayaprakash said that patriotism is not found in a piece of cloth, but it depends on our national virtues, values of life, and high moral standards of public life." The young man's voice was like a gust of wind, pushing the conversation forward with conviction and urgency. "When Nehru said, after the police firing in Patna, that he didn't care whether ten thousand or a million people became targets of police bullets, he would not allow the national flag to be disrespected at any cost, then Jayaprakash said that Nehru's tone was an authoritarian one, and there is no place for it in democracy." The young man's words were a lightning bolt, electrifying the room and illuminating the truth.

An elder, a former communist, expressed, "Our struggle is against Indira, not Nehru. Nehru was a remarkable man; don't link him with Indira."
A spirited youth interjected once more, "He's not as extraordinary as the government's propaganda has painted him. Place Nehru next to Jayaprakash Narayan, and he appears quite small. It was Nehru who foisted Indira Gandhi upon us. Why do you forget that? We are the people who follow JP's visions, unconcerned with opposition, never seeking for ourselves, rising against oppression wherever it emerges. Recall who checked the Indian Army's excesses in Nagaland, and whose personal intervention transformed a decade-long war into a peaceful accord. It was JP who freed Sheikh Abdullah from jail after he had suffered for eleven long years for no reason. It was JP who, with his moral strength, tamed the dacoit gangs in Madhya Pradesh, guided them on the path of reform, and when asked if he would advise these reformed dacoits to run for parliamentary elections, he quipped that they wouldn't find decent company in the Parliament as they were now reformed dacoits." Laughter bubbled up in response, and someone cried out in praise of JP and the revolution.

The atmosphere of the national anthem program morphed into an exuberant celebration of Jayaprakash Narayan's virtues, such that none would dare envision a similar event again. Rather, the effect was that people began engaging with our discussions, their hearts captured by JP's reminiscences, which propelled them beyond the rituals of liberty and into the pursuit of genuine freedom.

My father gave the booklet a cursory glance, flipping through its pages before handing it to me, knowing full well how curiosity consumed me. I had barely read a few pages when an elder from our village, leaning heavily on his cane, made his way into the bookshop. I fetched him a glass of cold water before returning to my engrossing read.
His curiosity piqued by my intense focus, the elder inquired, "What has captured your attention so, young one?" Rather than offering a verbal response, I presented the book's cover for his inspection. "Ah, I see," he mused, "You're delving into 'Islam and Family Planning.' And who is the author?" He continued without waiting for an answer, "Ah, of course, it's a work by Mawlana Minnatullah Rahmani."
Turning to my father, the elder remarked with a hint of confusion, "These clerics puzzle me. One can never be quite certain whether they stand in opposition to or support Indira Gandhi. Observe, here we have a booklet that argues against family planning, yet the author's own progeny holds a position as an MLC within the Congress Party."

Why are you holding the father responsible for his son's actions? The father has already reprimanded him. He said: Look, my friend, the son doesn't have a separate standing; a 31-year-old young man has been granted the MLC seat solely because he's the pride and joy of Khanqah-e-Rehmania, the eldest son of Minnatullah Rehmani. Unfortunately, this belief is being propagated among the disciples that the publication of this booklet is some major religious endeavor. Let everyone achieve as much as they can; at least they tried to contribute their part; the father attempted to quell the matter. He said: No, my friend, I don't agree, in my opinion, the half-hearted defense of these gentlemen is what has led to the current state of our religion.

A gentleman, long immersed in the pages of a book, felt compelled to join the conversation, exclaiming, "Oh, brother, don't you see the stature of Minnatullah Rehmani Sahib? In our corner of Purnea, he wields such influence that when he graced us with his presence, a line stretched beyond sight for those seeking water blessed by his touch. For a time, he breathed upon vessels and bottles, but as the crowd swelled, he blew upon a glass and ordered it inverted into the tube well. Until evening, the masses filled their containers with this hallowed water. If you cast doubt upon such generous and giving souls, then where, pray tell, will the common Muslim find their beacon of guidance and righteousness?"

Upon hearing this, the elder's anger flared. With a dramatic thud of his cane on the ground, he exclaimed, "Oh, my dear friend, greatness isn't about blowing on water or amassing disciples. True greatness is having the spine to stand up against tyranny, to fearlessly speak the truth. Observe the state of things: Muslims are forcibly evicted from their homes; police open fire on them as they please. Yet, whether it's politically-minded Muslims or Congressi scholars, opposition voices are scarce. Two major spiritual centers exist in Bihar, Mujibia in Patna and Rehmania in Munger, but their silence is deafening. Prominent Muslim scholars from Deoband, Nadwa, or organizations like Jamiat-e-Ulama remain mute as well.

To me, the genuinely resolute ones are the impoverished Muslims who took to the streets to protest the family planning program. They bravely faced police bullets to protect future generations, fulfilling their religious obligations, even if it meant martyrdom. I hope you don't mind my saying," he said, slamming his cane on the ground once more, "but it seems to me that many of these so-called eminent scholars are simply pawns in Congress's game. They don't genuinely support our cause, but they sporadically release statements or articles to create the illusion of solidarity and empathy with Muslims, so that the masses remain ensnared by their counterfeit compassion."

Keep learning, my dear, keep learning. You have many great journeys of knowledge and understanding ahead of you. But always remember one thing: never learn through the filter of blind devotion. For even the brightest sunlight offers no assistance to the sightless. With these words of wisdom, the elder lifted his staff and ambled away.

I stood there, deep in thought: Good heavens! What's happening? A booklet obtained with such clandestine measures is deemed unreliable, and the individual whose mere breath could bless an entire well isn't beyond doubt either. The waters are murky, and perhaps things are not as they seem upon first glance.

12
A Soul's Quest

As the relentless tide of the emergency stretched on, we, the Muslims, found ourselves increasingly engulfed by a sea of helplessness and despair. Like whispers in the wind, news of forced sterilizations drifted in from far-flung corners of the country, and we knew that we were the primary targets. It seemed the government had convinced itself that we had turned the opposition to birth control into a religious crusade – as if toppling this fortress would see resistance from other communities crumble to dust.

But that was just the glossy surface, a facade for a deeper, darker truth. Those orchestrating the campaign were haunted by the belief that Muslims had morphed into a demographic time bomb, ticking away within the nation. Our poverty, like shackles on our wrists, left no space for family planning. We were seen as an obstacle to be overcome, forcibly dragged along the path to progress. The once-inspiring slogan "eradicate poverty" had twisted into something grotesque, a battle not against poverty but against the impoverished themselves.

From urban jungles to quaint towns, stories of police brutality seeped into our consciousness, each account a fresh injection of horror. Censorship shackled newspapers, leaving us to stumble blindly, uncertain of the reality that lay beyond our immediate surroundings.

In our school, we formed a resistance committee against the emergency, a group of students with fire in our hearts and a desire to make a difference. But all we managed were a few secret meetings, brief flickers of rebellion snuffed out by circumstances. Thursdays were our half-days at school, when we would sometimes be set free immediately after fee collection – a duty we shared with our class teacher.

We made a pact to stay back at school on Thursdays, dedicating our stolen hours to drafting a memorandum, a desperate plea addressed to the Prime Minister of India. We would draw attention to the ongoing injustices against our people, and with a collective roar, we would warn of severe consequences, should the situation remain unchanged. The storm was brewing, and we would not be silenced.

We began to work on the memorandum, our hearts heavy and rebellious, with dreams of leaving a mark in a world that seemed to have no place for us. We sought refuge under the nurturing shade of a tree near the pond, the open sky our silent witness. In those days, trust was a luxury, and the classroom walls echoed with whispers of suspicion. Who could tell who was a government informant, lurking in the shadows?

With one of us standing guard, the three of us dove headfirst into the art of drafting the memorandum. A labor of love, an hour and a half later, our souls poured onto the paper in the form of a beautifully crafted letter.

Zafar, the quiet observer, finally spoke up when the ink dried on the last word, "You've painted a poignant picture with your words, but how about adding a touch of defiance, a bit of irreverence in the form of a verse?" Intrigued, I asked, "What do you have in mind?" He recited, "Don't be so proud of your fair skin; fair complexion will fade in just two days." It was a veiled jab at Mrs. Gandhi's beauty. Sajjad and I burst into laughter, the weight of our mission momentarily lifted by Zafar's unexpected contribution.

The next day, we surreptitiously slipped the letter into the central mailbox of the main post office, feeling like conspirators in a secret rebellion. We never learned the fate of our words, but in the act of sending them, we felt a spark – a small flame of hope flickering in the darkness.

During that time, Maulana Minnatullah Rahmani had convened an informal gathering of Muslim leaders at Delhi's Jamia Rahimiya Mehndian, where they declared family planning to be un-Islamic. Some scholars at the event had even whispered critiques of the government. It seemed that the same fearful atmosphere that had haunted our resistance committee as we drafted the memorandum pervaded this meeting as well, with everyone on edge about the possibility of a sudden crackdown by the secret police.

Maulana Mujahid-ul-Islam Qasmi, who had personally attended the Mehndian gathering, said, "The situation had become so tense that all these Muslim notables could have been sent straight to jail." After sending the letter, we, being young and naive, felt a similar sensation - as if we had narrowly avoided the looming threat of arrest.

In those days, Mrs. Gandhi's oft-repeated golden quote haunted the radio waves: "Sterilization is not forced, but necessary." Abba would lament that in '47, under the guise of partition, Muslims were subjected to violence, their foundations razed. Now, during the Emergency, they faced yet another form of annihilation. Newspapers, with their lips sealed, failed to reveal the truth of what transpired within the nation's borders. Columns left empty or crudely blacked out with ink bore witness to the stranglehold of censorship. Across the land, the voices of righteous scholars were muzzled, suffocated by an unseen hand.

During those days when Abba languished in jail, the 85-year celebration of Nadwatul Ulama unfolded. A slender volume, containing Maulana Ali Mian's inaugural address, found its way to us through the mail. With a mix of anticipation and devotion, I pored over the pages; the aura of the Maulana, someone I had once met in the company of my paternal uncle during his visit to Darbhanga, inspired a certain reverence.
My eyes raced across the text, hoping for solace, for wisdom, for solidarity. Yet, to my astonishment and dismay, any mention of the Emergency was glaringly absent. The words failed to reflect the reality

of a nation grappling with a delicate and dire situation, where Muslims faced mounting oppression. Instead, the address meandered through the suffering of Muslims after 1857 and the Khilafat Movement – but of the present-day plight of Muslims in a fractured India, not a whisper.
In the face of such turbulent times, the speech seemed to deliberately dodge the truth, as if to shield itself from the harrowing reality unfolding around us.

Amid the tapestry of faces gathered at the Nadwa event, the esteemed Sheikh of Al-Azhar stood out, weaving his own narrative of dissent in the face of the Emergency. As his speech swelled with criticism for the government's iron grip on a Muslim organization and the relentless oppression of Muslims, the interpreter dared to brush aside the Sheikh's mention of the Emergency. A voice of protest from the audience, though, compelled the interpreter to reluctantly weave a few subtle strands of the Sheikh's sentiments back into the story.
Qari Tayyab Sahib of Deoband, not merely an administrator but also the sitting president of the Personal Law Board, appeared to be the bastion of Sharia knowledge in the nation. Yet, one day his voice echoed across the airwaves of All India Radio, a somber reminder that the Emergency's stranglehold had suffocated the intellectual, academic, and spiritual fortresses we once held dear. As the days marched on, the Muslim community found themselves sinking deeper into a morass of despair. The Turkman Gate tragedy struck, and the relentless torrent of news painted a grim tableau, where every night seemed a night of Ashura, and every day a new apocalypse.

One day, as the sun cast its early morning glow and the clock ticked around seven or eight, a rickshaw pulled up in front of the bookshop. A gentleman, of a medium height and fair complexion, adorned in a sherwani with an overcoat and cap, glasses perched on his nose and a cane in his hand, alighted. Ah! It was Shabbir Uncle! His face partially concealed by a muffler and cap, I had failed to recognize him immediately. A dear friend of my father, Shabbir Uncle was the manager of the Jamal Printing Press, nestled in the heart of old Delhi.

In transit from Delhi to his village, Malmal, he had dropped by, as per tradition, to pay a visit to my father.

Whenever Shabbir Uncle graced us with his presence, it was as if a spark of festivity had been ignited within our souls. Our humble bookshop, in a mere heartbeat, metamorphosed into a cozy, welcoming sanctuary. As we scurried about, preparing tea and assembling nibbles, the grown-ups convened to engage in spirited discourse. A symphony of thoughts and ideas reverberated through the air, oscillating between moments of profound gravity and bursts of laughter, all orchestrated by the maestro himself, Shabbir Uncle, with his wit and captivating charm.

Shabbir Uncle regaled us with a tale involving Salik Sahib, whose office had been subject to a police search. Amidst the confiscated papers and ledgers, they discovered a copy of Diwan-e-Hafez. Wearing expressions of suspicion, they questioned him about its contents. Somewhat bemused, Salik Sahib clarified that it was merely a book of poetry. Nevertheless, the officers insisted that he read a passage aloud. With obliging grace, he recited:

"Salik knew the path, the customs well defined,
A journeyman's wisdom, in these verses you'll find."

Upon hearing the verse, the officers proclaimed, "I knew there was some important information about Salik Sahib in this book." With that, Shabbir Uncle erupted in laughter, infusing the gathering with a renewed sense of mirth.

Over tea, the conversation meandered towards the plight of Delhi. As the question of when this reign of tyranny and oppression might end hung in the air, Shabbir Uncle spoke with a somber conviction. He knew that the end would come, but the heir apparent's fate, he believed, would not be kind. He spoke of the injustices perpetrated by the mother and son duo, their actions evoking memories of the invasions of Nadir Shah. It was hard to fathom how one could inflict such cruelty upon their fellow man. Yet, as Shabbir Uncle's voice

quivered and his eyes glistened with unshed tears, it was clear that the events of Delhi had been etched into the very fabric of their souls.

He recounted the pain of another partition endured by Delhi, the once-vibrant city that had been destroyed first in 1947 and then again in 1976 when efforts to forcibly evict Muslims from Old Delhi emerged. Seven lakh people who had called Delhi's streets their home for centuries found themselves unlawfully displaced, their lives and properties decimated. It was as though Delhi had been razed to the ground, leaving behind a gaping wound and a legacy that historians hesitated to put into words.

"Where have these souls been dispatched? Word is that much blood has been spilled."
''And where will they find solace? In a supposedly free India, they suffer the agonies of liberty, forcibly relocated to desolate regions beyond the Yamuna, where dust swirls and urban comforts are but a distant dream. Some have been exiled to Trilok Puri, others dispatched to Seelampur or confined in Welcome. People who've coexisted for centuries now witness their livelihoods crumble in this upheaval, handed meager plots with sterilization stipulations.''
"They made no effort to gather all people in one sanctuary, in one shared colony." Someone lamented, "My friends, the entire dispute stems from their vexation with our communal existence. The Muslims endeavored greatly; a delegation even sought the ear of the DDA Vice Chairman, Jagmohan. Can you fathom what this wretched man uttered?" "What?" An unwitting inquiry escaped a gentleman, prompting all ears to harken. Shabbir uncle revealed, "The malefactor dared say, 'Do you believe us so insane as to annihilate one Pakistan only to erect another in its stead?'" "Ah, who is this venomous fellow?" an elder inquired, adjusting his spectacles. Shabbir uncle responded, "He serves as the DDA Vice President, but the true puppeteer behind this entire affair is none other than Sanjay Gandhi, harboring a deep-seated bias against Muslims. He views Old Delhi's Muslim populace as staunch Pakistan loyalists. Know that he commandeered the whole Turkman Gate operation himself. There's a woman, Rukhsana Sultana;

Sanjay frequents her company as they survey the region." "And who is this Rukhsana? We have heard his spouse bears another name," a gentleman interjected, perhaps having glimpsed the pair together in a vehicle. Shabbir uncle retorted, "Dear friend, matrimony is not a prerequisite in the realm of politics, and it's all too easy for such individuals who chip away at our foundations to infiltrate our midst." "And what of their president, the one who proclaimed Emergency at his mother's behest? Has Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed voiced no objection to this flagrant tyranny?" a gentleman beseeched for elucidation.

Shabbir uncle carried on, "Ah, dear friends, whether Fakhruddin holds the title of the President of the Republic or not, ultimately he remains a servant of Indira, tethered to her every whim. Can you truly expect a servant to take a stand? Much like Sheikh Abdullah, he could only feel the depths of his sorrow in the wake of the Turkman Gate incident. They both voiced their protest to Mrs. Gandhi, but alas, their objections were meek, void of any power. And the others? Spare a thought for Mohammad Yunus, a man embedded within the Nehru family, who dedicated his entire existence to the service of Nehru and Indira; he, too, found himself helpless. It is said that he merely remarked that Jagmohan fancies himself a modern Shah Jahan, desiring to reshape Delhi from its very core. Yet even he couldn't push forward; not one person's pleas could sway Sanjay. Ah, my dear friends, when has a servant's influence ever truly mattered?"

Years later, Uncle Shabbir's words echoed in my mind when, during Narasimha Rao's reign, Sonia Gandhi was restless to enter the gritty world of politics. Her desire to dive in was a concern for family friend Mohammad Yunus, who, after a lifetime spent serving the Nehru family, mistakenly believed he was the guardian of the third generation in the absence of the father-daughter duo. Out of a sense of duty and loyalty, he reluctantly expressed that it would be far better for Rajiv's widow to take up a begging bowl and ask for alms in the streets of Delhi than to descend into the filth of politics.
The devastating memories of Indira and Rajiv's untimely deaths still haunted Yunus's heart and soul. As an esteemed elder of the family, he

couldn't bear the thought of Rajiv's widow navigating the treacherous waters of politics. Sonia, however, found Yunus Uncle's comment difficult to stomach. Through a close advisor, V. George, she clarified that Mohammad Yunus did not speak for her.
The realization of Sonia's response hit Yunus like a ton of bricks. His sense of importance evaporated, and with a bitter tone, he declared, "A servant remains a servant."

Still, Yunus remained firmly entwined within the folds of their family; whispers persisted that Sanjay Gandhi's nuptials unfolded beneath the roof of his very dwelling. His progeny, Adil Shahryar, shared bonds of childhood camaraderie with Rajiv and Sanjay. Consequently, why would Yunus permit catastrophe to descend upon the Muslim community, and that too orchestrated by Sanjay's hands, within his own lifetime? The enigma defied comprehension. A certain gentleman, habituated to indulging in the scandalous tidbits of newsprint and offering his insights, endeavored to infuse the conversation with a fresh investigative slant.

He spoke, a note of frustration in his voice: "How perplexing it is for so many to comprehend the depth of hatred Indira and her son hold towards Muslims. A mother and son, who once claimed to uplift the poor and beautify Delhi, now seem to harbor resentment towards the very people they once purported to help. It's like a sad, twisted melody that betrays the harmony we thought we knew."
The room felt the weight of the words as he continued: "And what of this sudden transformation in their attitudes? Has the pot finally cracked, revealing its true contents? We, the Muslims, have long believed in their secularism, only to discover that our trust has been misplaced. And now, we are left with a sense of betrayal, as our so-called protectors become our tormentors."
He sighed, an air of melancholy wrapped around him: "Like a tragic play, the servants and the downtrodden are merely props in their twisted game of power. A game where they play God, deciding who rises and who falls, while we, the pawns, can do little but watch and suffer."

A bitter chuckle escaped his lips: "And so, they proclaim personal freedoms must be sacrificed for the greater good of the country. But who suffers the most? Muslims. It's as if our very existence is a threat to their idea of progress, and we must pay the price for their misguided beliefs."
As he spoke, a raw emotion stirred within those who listened, the pain of disillusionment hanging heavy in the air. The reality of their circumstances was a bitter pill to swallow, and it left a taste that was hard to forget.

"But the curious part is that this enforced sterilization, so heavily promoted by the government, is actually a part of Sanjay's five-point plan, even though he has no formal connection to the government. Indira's twenty-point program doesn't even touch on it."
He chuckled with a hint of cynicism, "But from Karan Singh's viewpoint, this single point carries more significance than all the other points combined."
"Who is this Karan Singh?" One gentleman inquired.
"Ah, you're not familiar with Karan Singh? The misplaced prince of Kashmir, who's been seeking his lost throne in Delhi for quite some time now. These devotees have discovered great importance in the twenty-point programs, insisting that just because family planning wasn't included, it doesn't mean it's insignificant. Instead, they argue, it's an indication that it's so essential that it cannot be simply reduced to a single point. They also propose that if people are reluctant to volunteer for family planning, the government should introduce the necessary legislation, but honestly, why bother with the formality of law-making when you can just govern with an iron fist? It's an unsettling time indeed. May Allah have mercy on the Muslims."
With that, Shabbir uncle adjusted his position, glanced at the listeners, and fell silent, leaving the room to contemplate the gravity of the situation they were in.

Years later, as I found myself engrossed in M.N.Buch's thought-provoking piece, "The Dharmic State," I couldn't help but be reminded of that gathering at the bookshop. It dawned on me that our seemingly

unacquainted elders, who might not have appeared well-versed in contemporary research methods or the ability to eloquently arrange arguments to support their cause, were indeed quite cognizant of the situation's severity.

In his article, the erudite author recounted his experience working in the Delhi Development Authority post-Emergency era when the Janata government held the reins: 'I still remember my days with the Delhi Development Authority shortly after the emergency was lifted and the Janata Government came to power. We had constructed shops in the Meena Bazar area of Jama Masjid and the Payenwala area of Dariba in Delhi to rehabilitate the shopkeepers who had been uprooted from there during the emergency. The majority of them were Muslims. Sanjay Gandhi told me that we were making a mistake because removal of the shopkeepers during the emergency had eradicated a potential nest of Pakistani supporters. I was horrified to hear this from the mouth of Jawaharlal Nehru's grandson, but it did suggest a mindset which looked on secularism as a convenience rather than an act of faith.'

In those days, I stumbled upon a book, like a hidden gem, waiting to be discovered. The book was penned by Ajoy Bose and John Dayal, titled "For Reasons of State: Delhi under the Emergency." As I flipped through its pages, I could sense the heartache and torment of our elders, their memories woven into every word. It was as if Shabbir uncle himself were narrating the harrowing tale of Turkman Gate in a dimly lit corner of the bookshop, his voice laden with emotion.

The book whispered to me, saying:

> ''Imam Hafiz Mohammed of Dargah Faiz-e-elahi Masjid had nearly finished the Monday prayers when the police came to the mosque. He had fervently prayed to Allah to stop the massacre outside and protect his congregation for the last 15 minutes. But Allah seemed to have deserted the Faiz-e-elahi mosque and its Imam on this day.
> The Masjid's huge main door had already been bolted to prevent the police coming in but it was just a precautionary measure. Imam

Mohammed had not really imagined the police would enter the holy place.

When there were loud knocks on the gate, Imam Mohammed had thought that the police were trying to scare them in opening the door. But a loud crunch on the door dispelled his illusions. The police were using a battering ram on the gate. He had fixed the gate just a month back and the bill had come to over seven thousand rupees. The Imam's heart sank as he thought the damages to the door would be the least of the things damaged that day.

The congregation was getting restless. The battering outside had risen to a crescendo. Finally, with a crash the gate broke open. Through the door poured in policemen.

"Stop, this is the house of Allah", the Imam screamed, his face a mask of fear and anger. But his voice was drowned in the screams of the 300 odd men, women and children as the police fell on them.

There was no escape from the police lathis in the small confined space of the mosque. One by one the people were being dragged out.

But it was by no means an easy task for the police. The people clung desperately to the walls and windows of the Masjid. They clung on despite the rain of lathis and blows by the police. The Masjid to them was still safer than the rampage going on outside.

"Okay, gas the bastards out of the Masjid", ordered a police officer. Two tear gas shells landed right inside the Masjid. In the closed space, the gas was murder. This brought the people running out of the Masjid like ants from an anthill. Just a few minutes of the gas and a person could choke to death.

Little Usman had lost track of his mother in the bedlam. Because he was small, he had been able to dodge the lathis and blows till now. But gas was another thing. His eyes blinded by tears, Usman ran hither and thither inside the mosque, but in the mad stampede he could not locate where the door was. His breath came in heavy pants.

"Amma Jan", he screamed. "Where are you?! Save me!" But Amma Jan was enveloped in the blanket of the gas which was slowly choking the life out of Usman. Someone stepped on him heavily but Usman was beyond feeling. The gas had taken his life.

Eighty-year-old Abdus Sattar crouched terrified next to the wall. He had been the sweeper of the Masjid for more years than he could remember. Never had he seen such a scene of bedlam. Screams,

lathis, tear gas and blood – Abdus Sattar closed his eyes and prayed to Allah. But soon the gas got to him. Coughing desperately, Abdus Sattar ran for the door.

He was caught just as he had managed to grope his way to the door. Dragging him by the neck was a burly constable. "I will come with you, but just let me go to the latrine once," cried Abdus. The answer came in a huge blow on his head, then everything blacked out for Abdus Sattar.

Imam Hafiz Mohammed had managed to retreat into one of the inner rooms of the Masjid.

"Hai, Allah", he prayed, "Help your children, how long will this massacre go on?"

"Where are you, Allah?" came a voice behind him. In the doorway stood two police constables and a Nehru Brigade man. It was the Nehru Brigade man who spoke.

"Bring your Khuda, Imam, and see what we do to him. Come on let's see, bring out your Allah, I want to see him," he jeered.

"I am the Imam of the Masjid. Do not touch a holy man. My blood will be on your head," the Imam shrank back. His heart gave a sudden leap as he remembered that his little son was sleeping in the next room.

"Where have you hidden the rest of them, Imam? We know that some of them are hiding in the next room," as he smashed the door of the next room. The Imam ran to stop him but he was grabbed by the neck by one of the constables.

"Ah, what have we here. Your son, Imam," the Nehru Brigade man's voice, a sibilant whisper. "Don't hurt him, he is only a little boy," the Imam cried.

"Arrest both of them," the Nehru Brigade man ordered.

"Okay, I will come along with you but don't hurt my son." The Imam had surrendered. But his little boy tried to run. A lathi caught him in the thigh and he fell on the floor. The Imam jumped to guard the boy. A lathi blow crashed on his left arm, breaking it instantaneously.

"Soften up this dog of a Imam a bit. It will take out some of the love of Allah out of him," the Nehru Brigade man barked.

Imam Hafiz Mohammed prayed on while the blows rained down on him.

"Allah, all these insults, all these humiliation to you, and your Imam. Punish them Allah. Let them remember what they did to your Masjid forever," the Imam prayed, as he was dragged outside.

In just half an hour the Masjid had become an abattoir. Blood lay in pools on the ground and the air was noxious with fumes of tear gas and groans and moans of the injured congregation.

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The police had come right up to the inner ring of houses of Turkman Gate and scores of them began to enter them. A new wave of carnage had started.

At Karta 3393 Turkman Gate, Husnah Begum lay huddled quivering with fear as she heard the sounds of gunfire and shouts outside her room. Her little boy Akbar cringed next to her as there were loud knocks on the bolted door.

"Open up. This is the police," shouted a voice.

The woman and child kept silent.

"We will break down the door if you don't open up," the voice shouted louder.

Akbar crawled even closer to his mother. Then a loud church and the door gave away.

Husnah Begam closed her eyes. She tried not to open them through her ordeal with the foul-smelling constable. Her soft whimpering only once rose to a scream when she heard the cries of little Akbar as he was smashed to the ground with a rifle butt. A strange darkness now surrounded her.

Just a few yards away, pretty, bright-eyed Salena Begum was fighting like a wild cat the burly constable who had broken into her room. The constable had already felt her nails and teeth.

"This is a tough bitch. I can't manage her alone. Come and help me," the constable called to one of his friends outside.

Two constables against one woman. Yet Salena fought. Biting, kicking and screaming, she dragged both of them from one corner of the room to the other of the room as they tried to tear off her burkha. Salena Begum would go down the hard way.

The scene had shifted from the demolition spot to inside the houses that remained standing in Turkman Gate. The firing had subsided as the police steadily poured into the lanes and by-lanes hunting for their kill.

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Curfew was declared at 5.30 in the evening. And then followed a systematic wave of looting and raping. Most of the men had either been arrested now or fled from the area. Only the women and children remained unguarded in their houses.

Razia Begum had been waiting for her husband for over an hour in her house but still no sign of him. There was a knock at the door and she eagerly went to open it. She found the figure of a police constable instead of her husband.

"Take off your earrings," he ordered. Razia gave him her earrings.

"Where do you hide your other jewellery?" Helpless, Razia directed him to the little box where her jewellery was and their accumulated saving over the years.

"And now your clothes." Razia pointed to the suit cases beside the bed.

"Not the clothes in your suitcase. The clothes on your body." The constable showed his betel-stained teeth.

Razia's eyes widened with terror. With a wild lunge she managed to dodge the constable grasping arm and ran out onto the verandah. Below lay a 40-foot drop to the ground.

"Come back, woman. What are your trying?" the constable shouted from behind.

Razia Begum closed her eyes and jumped. The pavement rose to meet her with a sickening thud.

It was getting dark in Turkman Gate. Red flocks still coloured the dark sky as the sun sank further. A hush had fallen, though occasionally the silence would be broken by screams or hysterical sobbing.

Not a light showed at any of the houses. The electricity had been cut off. So had the water and telephone connections. It was as if Turkman Gate had been disowned by the rest of the city.

The silence was broken suddenly by a weird crankling and croaking of machines. It seemed as if some primordial monster was laughing at the face of Turkman Gate. The bulldozers had started moving again.

Arrayed like a tank squadron, 16 bulky shadows came to life as the light of day completely went out. Their ugly snouts shaking as they moved forward. They seemed to be chortling with glee. There were no obstacles in front of them now.

> Nineteen year old Suleiman heard the sound of the bulldozers as he crouched inside a half demolished house. He had managed to escape and hide here. Nobody would think of looking in here. He was a bit worried about his brother. They had arrested him. Tomorrow he must try and bail him out, Suleiman thought.
> The sound of bulldozers did not mean anything to Suleiman at first. It must be the police trucks going off, he thought. The sound came closer and closer.
> This was no truck, it flashed through Suleiman's brain. Trucks don't make this sort of a noise. What could it be? Suleiman wondered as the noise grew louder and louder. He dared not look out lest he be discovered by a passing constable.
> The noise seemed to be heading towards the house in which Suleiman crouched. And as it was almost upon him, Suleiman knew it was a bulldozer.
> He opened his mouth to scream but his scream was drowned in the growl of the bulldozers as its 12-foot blade smashed its way into the house, mixing Suleiman's body into the rubble. Then the monsters moved on to destroy further.
> The darkness was suddenly lit by high-powered searchlights and the waste that was Turkman Gate lay stark and bare under their piercing rays.
> The 16 bulldozers kept on moving. They did not stop that night, nor the next day or night. In fact the bulldozers worked round the clock till April 22, till they had decimated all signs of life as well as death in Turkman Gate."

In the bookshop, conversation flowed like an unpredictable river, meandering away from Turkman Gate to incidents in other parts of the country, seeping into the very fabric of humanity. A man spoke of a village in Haryana, Utawar, where the whispers in newspapers told tales of more than a dozen souls surrendering to the agony of forced sterilization.

"In Utawar, injustice has blossomed like a dark flower, fed by the nourishing whispers of credible information and the haunted eyes of comrades who have witnessed it," Shabbir Chacha painted the scene. He spoke of Utawar, a Muslim-majority Haryana village, where the police rode in like horse-mounted conquerors, seeking their next

conquest. "To them, every Muslim-populated region is just another Pakistan," added another voice, blending into the symphony of discussion.

Eyewitness accounts painted a vivid picture of that fateful night: the village besieged by thousands of police officers, the erection of machine guns on high ground, and the echoing announcement for all men to gather at the government school. Fearful women and innocent children trembled as police searched house to house, with no choice but to comply. About 800 men were taken to the hospital by bus, many of whom had not yet tasted the sweetness of marriage. Desperate for an escape from the sterilization, some had even prepared fake divorce papers, but all these desperate attempts crumbled like sandcastles against the tide.

Each person was given a number for their turn, and in that moment, they ceased to be human. Shabbir Chacha laid emphasis on the word "digits," as if humanity had been stripped away, leaving only lifeless, insensible, soulless numbers.

"And what about the truth of Muzaffarnagar?" a voice asked, diving into the depths of police firing in Khala Par. "I've heard that even there, Muslims became targets of police bullets."

The tale unfolded further, revealing a man named Vidya Bhushan, a Congress leader who walked alongside Sanjay Gandhi. His gaze fell upon the Muslim area of Khala Par, and the police dragged a butcher and his customer to the sterilization chamber. As the news spread like wildfire, hundreds of Muslims took to the streets in protest. The Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) moved in, and suddenly, the market was filled with 35 corpses. Blood painted the streets, and a curfew was imposed. Muslim youths were ripped from their homes, falsely implicated in cases, with no hope for justice in sight.

Shabbir Chacha's voice trembled like a delicate leaf caught in the wind, as he whispered a prayer, "May Allah take on the oppressors, and deliver them a fitting retribution."

"Where have we arrived? This bizarre predicament we find ourselves in, compelled to select from two distinct types of demise," Abba pondered the dire state of affairs. "To either perish from the

unforgiving police bullets or to embrace our own annihilation at the hands of the doctor's cold scalpel. Behold the authentic visage of a liberated and democratic India."
"What's to be done now? We have to forge our own path amidst these very tribulations. The pot of tyranny cannot boil indefinitely. One day, even the mother of Maruti shall shed her tears. By Allah, we seek solace," uttered Shabbir uncle, rising to his feet with these words resonating.

Shabbir uncle, an embodiment of warmth and generosity, wore his signature smile as he always did. Stepping off the rickshaw today, he seemed no different, but as the conversation progressed, I saw the glisten of tears in his eyes more than once. Today, I began to grasp the depth of sorrow our elders have concealed behind their cheerfulness. Shabbir uncle may have moved on, but he left a trail of anguished whispers in his wake.
Contemplating this reality, I couldn't help but think of the country we live in. A place where, in just one year, 8.3 million people are forcibly sterilized; where twelve hundred innocent Muslims are martyred by police bullets in Turkman Gate, simply for wanting to protect their lives, homes, and belongings. How can everything be okay in such a place? What kind of life is this, where existing Muslims are slain by police fire and the paths of those yet to be born are blocked by the force of a gun?
And then it struck me that confining the Turkman Gate martyrs to a count of twelve hundred was an injustice in and of itself. This limited perspective couldn't accurately capture the gravity of the situation. The truth is, after the partition, Delhi's demographics were once again restructured, and Muslims were forcibly displaced. Abba's words rang true: when we witness crimes committed by those wearing the face of Hindus, we turn a blind eye to their true nature and move on.
Many have drawn parallels between the Turkman Gate incident and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, but like the memories of past riots that gradually faded from our minds, so too will the atrocities of the Emergency recede from our collective consciousness. I was reminded of Ali Mian's printed speech, presented with great fanfare during the

Emergency on the 85th anniversary of Nadwa. While Urdu newspapers emphasized its content, the speech itself offered no mention of the Emergency.
And so, I wondered, how can a nation that shies away from confronting its own reality hope to benefit from the guidance and illumination of history?

Months had elapsed since the Turkman Gate episode, and while the zeal of the sterilization crusade had diminished, an aura of hushed apprehension lingered. Amid this climate, word spread of a poetry gathering taking place in the Muslim quarter. Our neighbor, a prominent city dentist and poet with a portfolio of verse, inquired if we'd be interested in attending. On a frosty winter's night, tents were erected on the central lawn of the orphanage, bathed in the warm glow of gaslights. Esteemed poets graced the stage, and the recital proceeded with all the grandeur and flair one might expect. But the event's true challenge arose when the president of the assembly commenced the reading of his poem titled "Ego."
For the sake of silencing, the regality of ego reigned,
As the poet recited the first verse, listeners' ears perked up. The tongues that once cheered and praised grew cautious. The next few lines passed in restraint and decorum, but when the poet read this couplet:
Countless accusations, shackles and chains, a simple answer,
We have to admit, the burden of ego we bear.[xv]
The audience realized that the verses were dangerously political in nature. And when the poet recited the closing lines:
Wait for some more days, dear, for its demise,
Sooner or later, one day, the ego shall suffer.[xvi]
The audience exchanged uneasy glances, unsure of how to appreciate such poetry cautiously in the public gathering amidst this oppressive atmosphere. But the real dilemma lay in the fact that the president of the assembly was a respected scholar, revered by both the public and the elite. His outspokenness in this egotistical environment left people fearing that his courageous words might lead him into peril. In the minds of those gathered, the haunting memory of Hafeez Merathi

being whisked away to jail was still vivid. His fate had been sealed by the very verses that had poured from his soul, as he recited his poetry in the midst of a passionate crowd:

> In truth's abode, a verdict stands, agreed upon by all,
> For those who shun our faith, they rest behind the walls.
> Bold artists, Hafeez, face the tyrants' call,
> Not cowering, we deny the follower's thrall.[xvii]

The echoes of the poetry gathering had barely faded when the defiant whispers of Mohsin's protest against silencing permeated the air. These days, the town buzzed with heated conversations, discussing Amrit Nahta's film 'Qissa Kursi Ka' (The Tale of the Chair) – a wicked satire targeting Sanjay and Indira's style of rule. The government's refusal to license the film and the unlawful destruction of the original only stoked the flames of public debate.

The film painted a vivid picture: a nation plagued by poverty because of tiny rats, those devious creatures that whisked away our grain to enormous stockpiles. And so, the solution seemed obvious – exterminate the rats, and eradicate poverty. The government launched a rat-killing scheme, offering ten rupees a head. Yet the allegory hid a darker truth – the rats symbolized the poor, the desperate, with Muslims topping the list. The Emergency's rulers were convinced that controlling the birth rate of poor Muslims was the key to prosperity.

As I immersed myself in this world of symbols and hidden meanings, I couldn't help but marvel at the sinister methods employed to dehumanize these people, to reduce them to mere animals. It was a necessary step before annihilating them. And there, in the midst of it all, stood my father, with his incredible insight and unwavering intuition. He saw right through the façade of poverty eradication, recognizing the government's true intentions to obliterate the poor.

13
Unveiled Scars

And then, like a bolt from the blue, Mrs. Gandhi had an epiphany, and she proclaimed the call for elections. Despite whispers suggesting that the reigning powers had no intentions of stepping down, and amid discussions of forming a new Constituent Assembly, the announcement took everyone by surprise. As for us, we had always maintained a comfortable distance from the electoral dance, keeping ourselves aloof.

Father preached that voting for the lesser of two evils was a betrayal of reason and understanding. When there's no alternative worth considering, who should receive our precious votes? But the winds of change were blowing, and a new situation loomed before us. To rescue the people from the choking grip of despair, a political upheaval was indispensable.

Within our circle, the elders were caught in a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts. Shams Peerzada from Bombay and Abdul Hafeez Khan from Nagpur were particularly zealous in searching for a resolution. But before the storm of debates could crystallize into a coherent stance, our beloved elder brother Arshad took matters into his own hands. With fierce determination, he championed the opposition, diving headfirst into the turbulent waters of the campaign.

Father chose not to voice any objections, and our loyalties, now bound by empathy, found their place firmly alongside the opposition.

During those times, one fateful morning, news of President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed's demise emerged, creating a melancholic atmosphere. I found myself immersed in the final examination of my Matric that day, when whispers of his passing reached my ears. As I left the exam hall and sought a rickshaw to bring me home, I spotted an elder from the village, who accompanied his young son for his examination. A broad smile stretched across the elder's face as he caught sight of me, and he warmly insisted that I join them in the rickshaw.

The rickshaw journey began, and before I could utter a word, the elder shared, "You know, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed has passed away." I acknowledged the news, telling him that I had just discovered it within the examination hall. He praised my awareness, then expressed his uncertainty about the cause of death, suggesting a heart attack as the apparent reason.

I couldn't help but consider the possibility of a conspiracy. "Shabbir Chacha also mentioned that Ahmed was deeply troubled by the Turkman Gate incident. Who knows the pressure he must have faced?" I mused. The elder, however, chuckled softly, dismissing my concern. "Not everything is a conspiracy, my friend," he stated. "It's quite clear: if a Muslim is even slightly devout, if he still harbors a shred of faith within his heart, he cannot assimilate into this system. His conscience continually torments him; he feels powerless, as he cannot provide justice to his brethren or prevent the infringement of their rights—even when he occupies high government positions."

As our conversation unfolded, I learned that Ahmed's relationship with Mrs. Gandhi had deteriorated in his final days. I pondered why he hadn't made a tough decision while seated in the highest government office. The elder explained that the limited powers of a president were particularly restrictive for a Muslim president. He shared the story of Dr. Zakir Husain, who had contributed immensely to communitarian services, supporting Muslim university during challenging times and launching a vigorous Urdu campaign. Yet, when he assumed the presidency, he chose silence.

Curious, I inquired about the reasoning behind this shift. The elder shared a compelling perspective. The people who appointed Dr. Husain president recognized that his Muslim identity held strategic importance for the nation's secularism. With a Muslim president viewed as a means to bolster secularism, how could he possibly express interest in Urdu or other Muslim-related matters while holding such a position?

Years later, as I stood before the Shah Commission report and its intricate web of documents, I couldn't help but marvel at the uncanny foresight of our esteemed elder. He seemed to possess an almost

otherworldly understanding of the political landscape, despite never having the opportunity to wander the labyrinthine halls of power.
It was there, in the testimony of Subhadra Joshi, a Congress MP from Old Delhi at that time, that the late President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad's words echoed in a haunting whisper: "That boy (Sanjay Gandhi) is delinquent, insane and a sadist and, above all, anti-Muslim. We do go to Mrs Gandhi (with the complaints). But the problem is her son (Sanjay Gandhi) invariably gets the complainants arrested." The late President had also confided in her his profound sense of sorrow and helplessness: "I am sad at what is happening in Delhi. What can I do? Nobody listens to me. He (Sanjay Gandhi) even accused me of being a communalist." As I delved deeper into this sobering reality, I found myself contemplating the harrowing plight of ordinary Muslims, who must feel like mice caught in a terrifying game of cat and mouse. If even the highest-ranking Muslim in the country feels so utterly powerless, what hope could there be for those who suffer in silence, caught in the unforgiving crosshairs of persecution?

As I reminisce about that journey to America, a poignant, almost melancholic sensation envelops me. The year was 1996, and the cold December air carried the faint scent of Christmas cheer. Heathrow Airport, with its cacophony of holiday travelers, set the stage for an experience that remains etched in my mind. Upon entering Virgin Atlantic's lobby, I was struck by an ocean of religious Jews swathed in black coats, trousers, and hats—almost a surreal vision that made my heart race for a moment. But soon, I thought that perhaps our shared experience in the long seven-hour flight might become a catalyst for understanding, bridging the perceived gaps between us. As if serendipity had plans of its own.
As I sat among these strangers, flipping through the pages of newspapers and magazines, an article titled 'The Jews in Hitler's Military' arrested my attention. My knowledge of Jewish history was extensive, yet this revelation was nothing short of earth-shattering. The author cited Bryar Rigg's research, shedding light on the harrowing fact that during the Holocaust, Jewish individuals had indeed served in Hitler's army, actively fighting against their own

kind. Rigg's investigation unveiled that over one and a half million soldiers with Jewish roots stood shoulder to shoulder with the Nazis, a reality as chilling as it was bewildering.

These revelations cut deep, stirring emotions that lay dormant, waiting to be awakened. I thought of the Mischlinge-Germans, the people torn between two worlds, forever grappling with their duality, never quite fitting in. Rigg's interviews with over twelve hundred former German soldiers revealed the lifetime of anguish and guilt they bore silently, the burden of a past they could neither escape nor confront. And when Rigg dared to ask the questions they had long evaded, the dam broke, unleashing a torrent of pent-up emotions, a heart-wrenching reminder of the inescapable power of our history and the human capacity for resilience and redemption.

It was inconceivable to think that Hitler wasn't aware of Jewish soldiers in his army, some even holding significant positions. But his thirst for seasoned commanders surpassed the importance of their lineage, even if they hailed from Jewish families. These Jews proved useful, as they were prepared to betray their own people just for a chance to survive or gain some petty material advantage.

Astonishment coursed through me when I discovered that the majority of these soldiers never even received a guarantee of life for their despicable deeds. When their time came, they too found themselves on trains headed to concentration camps. Some met their fate in gas chambers, clad in military uniforms and adorned with medals. One soldier, desperate to prove he was not of Jewish descent, sought out his imprisoned mother in a concentration camp. The resilience of the mother shone as she accepted the accusation that her son was conceived through a German Catholic's sperm rather than his Jewish father's, all to save her child's life.

I set the newspaper aside on the table, contemplating the depths of human depravity. Can a person truly trade their life by pushing their own nation, family, and even household to the brink of destruction? What does it mean to be a mother, a being who spares no thought for her honor, concocting false accusations to ensure her child's survival? But the real shame falls upon the son, who subjects his mother to

unimaginable mental and spiritual anguish in the hellish confines of a concentration camp, all in the name of self-preservation.

I turned to the young Jewish traveler beside me, who had been observing my reading with a quiet intensity. He was connected to a Jewish College in London and seemed to have grasped my genuine curiosity about the newspaper article. He spoke, "What are your thoughts on this piece? It's strange, isn't it, and incredibly fascinating! I met Rigg once; he visited my college. He's a passionate researcher, journeying through Europe and America, interviewing innumerable elderly Jews."
I probed, "What's your take on this?"
His eyes met mine as he said, "Rigg has touched a nerve. How can we cast blame on others when it was our own people who became collaborators? Without them, it would have been impossible for six million Jews to be led to their demise." He pointed at himself and continued, "The seeds of the Holocaust were sown within us; our adversaries only served to expose and nurture them."
I asked, "The incidents that Rigg has recounted, do they hold any truth?"

He said, "Nothing is completely surprising. For a long time in Europe, Jews have been adept at hiding their true selves, their identities. Even now, so many who seem to be Christian on the surface—if you really investigate—you'd find that their roots lie within Jewish families. But the real crux of the issue isn't the transformation of identity, it's the existence of those people who, just for their own minor gains, are willing to bring suffering and degradation upon their own people, and yet they don't really gain anything in return."
Curious, I asked, "How do Jewish intellectuals perceive these events?"
He responded, "A new debate has ignited, a self-reflective exploration. The good thing is that those who've lived under the weight of guilt for decades, fifty years even, are finally finding their voices. They're filled with regret and openly admitting their wrongdoings. It's becoming common for people to realize that even if you manage to save your own life through betrayal of your people, it's not truly saved, for the

scars of that betrayal will continue to torment you for the rest of your life."

The tea, that ephemeral liquid of warmth and comfort, had long vanished. I tucked the article, a fragment of thought, into my bag, attempting to morph my seat into a makeshift bed. The journey stretched out before me, a ribbon of time, and I sought solace in the embrace of a fleeting slumber. But sleep, that elusive mistress, refused to grace me with her presence, as the words from the newspaper article still danced within the theater of my mind.

Rigg's research, a spark igniting unease, had set ablaze the intellectual circles of the Jewish community. Souls ached, the wounds within wept, and tears became the saline balm in a futile attempt to cleanse the hurt. Memories of the emergency, a haunting tableau, emerged from the shadows of my thoughts: the Muslims of Turkman Gate besieged by a miniature apocalypse. The air, thick with the cries of innocent children and helpless women, bore witness to police bullets, forced evictions, and, towering above all, the sinister orchestration of sterilization and genocide.

A Muslim President, his visage flickering in and out of my consciousness, had begrudgingly signed the decree that unleashed this maelstrom. I found myself drifting to thoughts of Mohammad Yunus, once Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's special representative. A complex figure, critical of Jagmohan's policy on one hand, while simultaneously echoing the sentiment expressed by the chronicler of Slum Clearance (demolition, etc.): “all these Muslims who are supporting the Imam should be dragged and thrown out of the city.”

Mrs. Gandhi's desires aligned with his, as the chronicler penned, citing Siraj Paracha, "Until the Muslim majority in the Jama Masjid area is diluted, this area will continue to be a headache for them." The words, like specters, haunted the corners of my mind, making sleep a distant dream.

I can't help but think of Shah Nawaz Khan, who, through his connection to the Nehru family, served in various ministries and maintained prominent positions during the Emergency. Muzaffar

Hussain Burney, who clashed with Abdullah Bukhari while acting as the chairman of the Waqf Board, and most notably, Maulana Asad Madani, who was first bestowed with Rajya Sabha membership by Mrs. Gandhi in 1968. M.F. Husain also crossed my mind, as an ardent supporter of the Emergency, who later had no choice but to leave the country. Shafi Mohammad Qureshi, who was then Deputy Minister of Railways, and Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, who had personally witnessed the devastation of Turkman Gate, must have felt a deep pain as they saw Old Delhi and other Muslim-majority areas in the country trembling with the cries and groans of Muslims.

As I reminisce, the vivid image of Sanjay Gandhi's caravan during the days of destruction comes to life, endlessly circling Old Delhi. Within this caravan, Rukhsana Sultana's figure emerges, a key player in the demolition and sterilization efforts in Old Delhi. She boldly encouraged Muslim women to abandon their veils, to live as she did, for after all, she too was a Muslim. Indeed, the same Rukhsana Sultana whose daughter, Amrita Singh, would later rise to fame in the film industry. I also recall Latif Fatima, a part of Sanjay Gandhi's caravan and the adopted daughter of Shah Nawaz Khan, whose son Shah Rukh Khan now reigns as the king of the film world.

The question lingers: Did the Congress's anti-Muslim campaign find support among Muslim generals, collaborators, and scholars? As I pen these lines today, I am left wondering about the whereabouts of these individuals and their fates. Mohammad Yunus once lamented that, despite devoting his entire life to the service of the Nehru family, he never received the respect he deserved; he departed this world with the belief that "a servant is always a servant." From Zakir Hussain to Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, and from Shah Nawaz Khan to Burney, Madani, and countless other servants, I can't help but wonder if they ever had the chance to cleanse the wounds on their souls with their own tears.

14
Portal to History

One day, in the bookshop, whispers of Imam Abdullah Bukhari of the Jama Masjid began to echo. He was under the spotlight due to his captivating election appeal. It had been an age since a Muslim leader left a profound impression on the political landscape. Memories tethered to the grand Shahjahan Mosque of Delhi and the power of Islam appeared to be rekindled, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. A report from a gathering in Mumbai, where Abdullah Bukhari had alluded to the excesses of the Emergency, urging people to vote for the Janata Party in a bid to overthrow the Congress, caused a stir.
A gentleman passionately exclaimed, "Now Congress is doomed! Ziauddin Bukhari of Mumbai, who had been aligned with the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind and Congress, has also begun to campaign fervently in favor of the Janata Party. Abdullah Bukhari's daring entrance into the fray has ignited an atmosphere akin to 'the lion has come.'"
"Preposterous! Mere bluster!" The professor cautioned, "You people fail to grasp the essence of things and are easily swept up in the fervor." He continued, "It wasn't long ago when the 'Lion of Kashmir,' Sheikh Abdullah, was the subject of much fanfare, yet now Congress has ensnared him in such a manner that he has become meek. You folks are not acquainted with Abdullah Bukhari. A mere few years ago, he advocated for family planning; his appeals, accompanied by his photos, were displayed in Muslim areas. He was favored by the government, which even sent him to Moscow and on visits to the Gulf countries. He believed that, perhaps, this path would resolve the issue pending with the Waqf Board regarding his role as Imam. But when he discerned his public image crumbling due to this stance, he deftly altered his strategy."

Ah, I see! The gentleman, as he folded the newspaper, glanced at the professor with a hint of bewilderment in his eyes, and began, "Do peruse the newspapers from a couple of years back, and you shall come across Abdullah Bukhari's passionate appeals in support of family

planning. However, what could have sparked such a transformative shift in his stance?" He inquired, curiosity piqued.

The response followed, "In 1973, Abdullah Bukhari's father, Hamid Bukhari, stepped down from his position as Imam, passing the role to his son, who was serving as the Deputy Imam at the time. The Waqf Board officials found this appointment rather objectionable. They regarded the Imam of the Grand Mosque as a mere employee of the Waqf Board, attempting to remind him of his place. Consequently, tensions simmered between the Waqf Board and Abdullah Bukhari. Concurrently, his advocacy for family planning chipped away at his public approval, with people labeling him a 'government Imam' and steering clear of praying behind him. And so, Abdullah Bukhari underwent a radical transformation in his stance. It was during those days when a vicious attack on Ajmer's visitors occurred, and heinous acts of violence were perpetrated against Muslims in Sadar Bazaar. Abdullah Bukhari made these injustices the focus of his sermons, and, as if by magic, a throng of worshippers flocked to the Jama Masjid, eagerly absorbing the Imam's impassioned words.

"Well, at the very least, he found his way back to the righteous path. As for the state of hearts, only God truly knows. Now, how did the matter of the imamate come to be resolved?" He eagerly inquired.

The tale continued, "What unfolded next was a pivotal meeting of the Waqf Board, held at the 'Bachchon ka Ghar' (Children's Home) under the supervision of Central Minister Shahnawaz Khan. Upon catching wind of the news, the Imam rallied his supporters and descended upon the gathering, intent on causing a disruption. A tumultuous skirmish erupted, and the Imam and his companions were taken into custody. Meanwhile, whispers swirled within the vicinity of the Jama Masjid, falsely claiming that the Imam had been gunned down. In their sorrow and rage, the masses spilled onto the streets. Clashes with the police ensued, resulting in the deaths of seven or eight individuals, and a curfew blanketed the area for days on end. Roughly two weeks later, the Imam was set free, and Deputy Minister Rail Shafi Qureshi emerged as a mediator. At last, the imamate issue reached its resolution."

Ah, I hadn't known about these matters! But it must be acknowledged that Abdullah Bukhari managed to resolve his situation not by appeasing the government, but by harnessing the strength of the people. He identified the wellspring of his power, which is why today, he stands in a position where he can valiantly confront a formidable government without fear.

Indeed, I cannot disagree that he finds himself on more solid ground now as compared to before. Yet, I can't help but feel apprehensive about the day he might fall prey to Congress's sly schemes, which have previously tamed even the mightiest of lions with their guile.

Alas, the professor's trepidation proved prophetic during the 1980 elections when Abdullah Bukhari issued an appeal in support of the Congress. It is whispered that though his words retained their thunder, they lacked the moral and spiritual weight they once carried. While he remained politically influential up until the era of VP Singh, the spellbinding aura of the Shahjahanabad Imam's splendor and magnificence, established in the 1977 elections, could never be recaptured.

As the elections unfolded, Mrs. Gandhi found herself swallowed by defeat, and with it, the end of the Emergency, allowing a refreshing gust of political change to sweep across the nation. A newfound hope blossomed, as the government announced the formation of the Shah Commission, a beacon of justice meant to investigate the excesses of the Emergency era and seek possible remedies. In times past, investigative commissions had been established, but more often than not, their true purpose lay in stalling issues or burying them beneath the sands of time.

Yet this time, the Shah Commission spoke a different language – one of redress, inviting the affected souls to seek compensation for the losses they had suffered. People began to perceive the end of the Emergency and the rise of the Janata Party as a new kind of freedom, like a phoenix emerging from the ashes. Some dared to hope that just as the brave freedom fighters of 1947 were rewarded with government benefits, perhaps a new scheme would be devised for those who had borne the brunt of the Emergency.

In the midst of this backdrop, the Shah Commission's invitation for individuals to quickly submit their estimated losses for compensation seemed like a ray of hope, piercing through the darkness. With bated breath, the nation watched and waited, as expectations soared for revolutionary actions from the new government.

My elder brother embarked on the task of assessing the damages, the weight of our family's loss resting on his shoulders. The bookshop, once a sanctuary of knowledge, had been ravaged by the government lockdown, its walls crumbling like the delicate pages of the books it once housed. We wondered if the Shah Commission would deliver the justice we so desperately sought.

When Abba learned of the commission's purpose, he listened with a mix of curiosity and skepticism, flipping through the form and allowing a wry smile to grace his lips. "Nothing will come of these matters," he mused. We told him about the potential monthly allowances for the Emergency's prisoners, akin to those given to freedom fighters. His response was tinged with bitterness: "Why should we expect anything from this second freedom? We Muslims are still grappling with the fruits of the first. Expecting justice from them is a fool's errand."

With a sigh, Abba eventually allowed my brother to submit the compensation papers to the Shah Commission, though his words had already dampened our hopeful spirits. He later confided that commissions were often established for political machinations, leaving us to wonder how they could ever truly compensate for our losses. While material damages could be calculated, and financial losses estimated, who could possibly quantify the heartache, the scars left on our souls?

Abba's words resonated deep within us, as if they were giving voice to an intangible wound we had yet to comprehend. We couldn't shake the feeling that something within us had been irreparably broken. It would take years for us to truly understand the magnitude of the devastation we had endured.

It was during those days, days steeped in celebration and remembrance, when the country marked its 50th year of independence. I found myself inexplicably drawn to a social gathering in a bustling Muslim neighborhood of Old Delhi. The event, a wedding at its core, became the unlikely gathering place for several passionate, agitated young men who shared a special connection with me.

One such young man, his age dancing between the realms of 30 and 35, approached me with a story to share. Introducing himself as Nasser, he asked me to see him as a native of Old Delhi. While he resided in Mayapuri, his formative years were spent navigating the labyrinthine streets of Turkman Gate. At the mention of Turkman Gate, a shiver ran down my spine. I asked him where he was during the days of the Emergency.

His eyes, deep pools of memory and pain, spoke before his lips could form the words. "I must have been around ten or twelve years old at the time. I witnessed those horrifying scenes with my own eyes, images that haunt me, images that I can never forget for the rest of my life. Even today, when I see a bulldozer somewhere, a wave of terror washes over me. It feels as if it will crush my very existence with its iron claws. Although I know that this bulldozer has no connection to the ones from the Emergency, somehow, buried in the depths of my subconscious, there lies a belief that bulldozers are anti-Muslim, that they were created with the sole purpose of destroying Muslims. No matter how much rational analysis I attempt, I can't escape the suffocating grip of my fear."

Tears shimmered in his eyes, threatening to spill over as he paused for a moment. Collecting himself, he continued, "What can I say? One of these bulldozers stole the life of my cousin. They are murderers, cold-blooded murderers, and nothing less."

In that fleeting moment, I couldn't comprehend how this seemingly well-adjusted young man, a software engineer with a contagious grin, suddenly found himself spiraling into the abyss of melancholy. Then it dawned on me: depression, the insidious specter, haunts its victims by tearing open their frail souls, dragging them back into the shadows with no warning. Desperate to pull him from the brink, I tried to steer

the conversation elsewhere, but he was beyond the reach of my feeble attempts.

He spoke in a voice tinged with the weight of sorrow, revealing the darkness hidden within: "Perhaps you don't understand, but we are still shackled to the Turkman Gate incident that forced us into the cold embrace of Mayapuri, Nand Nagri, Trilokpuri, and other city outskirts. How can we erase the nightmarish scene burned into our retinas, haunting our every waking moment? Our roots lie in Old Delhi, and the ghosts of our past swell our hearts with anguish when we venture back. Our children, innocently curious, demand the truth. They want to know the winding alleys we called home, the bustling shops we owned, the neighbors who shared our joys and sorrows. But how do we recount our history, knowing it will only shackle them to our pain? Is there freedom in hiding the truth or will it only fester in the shadows, waiting to consume another generation?"

He told me about his cousin, a brilliant woman armed with a PhD, who dedicated her life to social causes. She refused to marry, much to her family's dismay. When they pressured her, tears streaked her cheeks. Was it heartache? A failed romance, perhaps? But when she shared her secret, we all gasped in horror. It was the Turkman Gate incident that had burrowed its claws deep into her heart. She spoke of Nida, her childhood friend, who had been just a tender nine or ten years old when police stormed her home during the sterilization campaign. They made her an object of their depraved desires, leaving her lifeless shell behind. The thought of marriage and children conjured the image of sweet, innocent Nida – a reminder of the brutal world awaiting her children.

With trembling voice, Nasser confided, "People are blind to our suffering, ignorant of the chaos that writhes within our souls. On the surface, we march forward, our laughter echoing, smiles painting over the cracks in our hearts. But deep within, our wounds fester, waiting for the moment they can no longer be contained."

As I pen these words, the scarred faces of Khala Par from years past stir once more, their tormented souls never finding solace even today. I'm reminded of the gripping report by Kaunain Sharif, published in

the Indian Express, which featured interviews with those afflicted, four decades after the emergency:

On October 19, Shabiran had asked her elder son Nizamuddin, 18, to run up to the kirana shop in Malhupara to get some sugar. When Nizamuddin did not return, she sent her younger son Salammudin to look for him. Minutes later, Salammudin would scream: "Bhaiya ko unhone maar diya, ammi (Mother, they have killed Nizamuddin)."

Shabiran, in her early seventies, sits hunched on the floor, outside the steps of her house. "I ran towards the road and saw Nizamuddin lying there. As I held him, I saw blood oozing out of his chest. He opened his eyes, did not speak. I asked him, beta kyun so raha hai, ghar chal (why are you sleeping? Let us go home). He held my hand and turned his face away from me. The police then took his body away. I shouted, cried, no one heard me," says Shabiran, breaking down. Two hours later, Shabiran's husband, a rickshaw puller, would come home only to slip into a state of shock for weeks. "When he saw our son's blood on the road, he started washing it and didn't stop for hours. He later went to the burial ground and wrapped our son with a shroud. He did not speak to us for weeks." she says.

Her husband died seven years later in a road accident. "You ask me what I remember of my son? Let me tell you something. I think of him every day. And then, he asks me, 'mujhe kyun maara, ammi (why did they kill me, mother)?". Does anyone have an answer to this?"

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Forty years ago, on October 19, Umar, who worked at a metal factory, was left partially

immobile in his left shoulder after he was hit by his two bullets. "I was returning home after buying some milk when I was shot at by the PAC. I just fainted," he says. "They threw us in the hospital like we were animals. The doctors said they would have to cut off my left hand. I told them I would instead go to a hospital in Meerut," he says, adding that he had to undergo four operations.

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At 93, Khwaja Abdul Majeeb has had frequent bouts of forgetfulness. But ask him about October 18, the day his son Mohammed Saleem was shot dead in Khalapura, and he talks about it as if it were yesterday.

Saleem's is the first name on the list of 25 at Shaheed Chowk. Saleem, Majeeb's youngest son, was among the protesters who had gathered at the chowk. Majeeb says he was working at the bus stand, when policemen picked him up for sterilisation. …

Majeeb says he didn't know of his son's death for almost a day. "I thought he would be alive somewhere. It's only when I went looking for him at the cemetery that I realised he was dead." The grave digger at the cemetery had torn bits of clothes of the dead before burying them so that families could identify the spot where their loved ones were buried. "That's where I found my son's torn shirt."

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Hasina was eight months pregnant when the PAC allegedly gunned down Mohammed Saddique, her 30-year-old husband who was leaving for the steel factory where he worked. "When they brought the body home, I saw a hole in his face. The bullet had entered through his jaw and come out of his neck," he says.

For years after her husband's death, Hasina made charpoys for Rs 7 each, besides stitching clothes. "I have sat in the hot sun, making these charpoys. I had to take care of my three children. My son had to drop out of school to work and save for his sisters' wedding," says Hasina.

Her son Shahid, 44, now works as a carpenter in Muzaffarnagar. "The government took away my son's education. I want them to give him some job so that he can educate his three children," she says.

The Shah Commission's tantalizing promise of justice ultimately fizzled out, like a firework display that suddenly turned into smoke. As if fate had intervened, the Janata Party government crumbled before the Commission could make a stand. Rumor has it that the ever-enigmatic Jayaprakash Narayan had sensed something amiss; perhaps the people he placed his trust in just weren't cut out for such a herculean task.

Morarji was a creature born from the very Congress culture he sought to dismantle. His eyes locked on the prize: the coveted role of Prime Minister. Twice it had slipped from his fingers like sand. First, he was outshone by the luminescent Lal Bahadur Shastri, and then he found himself lost in the labyrinth of Indira Gandhi's political chess game.

Jayaprakash was painfully aware of this twisted turn of events. His health, fragile as a porcelain doll, was on the brink of shattering. As he lay in the sterile confines of Mumbai's Jaslok Hospital, he uttered words that would reverberate through the halls: if only his health had been stronger, he'd have given them a run for their money.

Jayaprakash, a man of clarity, selflessness, and boundless generosity, stumbled upon a pitfall in his fervent quest to dethrone Indira. Perhaps without intending to, he made the mistake of opening his arms to Jan Sangh, welcoming him into his resistance movement. Little did he know, this move would crack open a door for a fringe extremist group to slip into the mainstream like a snake in the grass.
The tendrils of the Emergency crept far and wide, even as the RSS tried to cozy up to Mrs. Gandhi herself. Balasaheb Deoras penned letters to her, extolling the virtues of certain Congress programs, sowing seeds of understanding, all while Atal Bihari Vajpayee managed to spend most of the Emergency on parole, ducking in and out of the shadows.
Yet, what could Jayaprakash do? His body strained under the weight of his failing health, and his ascetic spirit would not allow him to assume control of this tumultuous crusade.

In the oppressive shadows of the Emergency era, a tiny seed of hope took root amidst the strife between Hindus and Muslims. The members of RSS, alongside the Jamaat-e-Islami, experienced a profound revelation as they lived together in close proximity. Stereotypes of Islam and Muslims crumbled under the weight of reality, giving way to a delicate bond of mutual understanding and affection.

Initially, the embers of this unexpected alliance burned bright, illuminating the hearts and minds of those involved. There was great excitement to nurture this newfound connection, spreading its healing influence far and wide. But as the winds of time blew relentlessly, those embers lost their spark, surrendering an invaluable opportunity to the sands of history.

The Shah Commission, too, withered in the face of uncertain intentions. From its inception, it sought to investigate the "excesses" committed during the Emergency. But how can one trust a commission that describes the systematic annihilation of a community as mere "excesses"?

Despite the many obstacles, the commission's report found its way to the light, albeit in three unofficial parts. One part unveiled the brutalities of Turkman Gate, echoing the cries of countless reports that came before. The victims of these state-sanctioned crimes remain unavenged, some still clinging to their last breaths in this world, others already departed, forever yearning for justice.

Alas, the iron grip of state oppression and police brutality persists, unbroken. The souls of the persecuted Muslim community are haunted by the specter of Turkman Gate, present in every corner, every moment. It is only by the grace of a close call, a police bullet just missing its mark, that the illusion of safety remains intact.

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15
Minds United

The dawn of the Janta government may not have transformed the political horizon, but it certainly unleashed a newfound sense of freedom, an uplifting liberation from the suffocating psychological shackles. Suddenly, public gatherings, animated discussions, and impassioned debates sprouted across the country like wildflowers after a storm.

An idea emerged, akin to a seed carried by the wind: why not organize a proper public gathering? The emergency resistance group, composed of old school friends, had reached the end of its natural life cycle. It was time for the birth of a new entity, a literary group of old and new comrades, brought together to orchestrate a nationwide movement for Islamic literature.

With the fierce determination of fireflies on a moonless night, the skeleton of a new organization took shape. The grand gathering didn't require grand arrangements; just a large banner, proclaiming the event's magnificence and instilling a sense of national pride, and white sheets to drape over the stage tables, as if dressing them for a wedding. A microphone for the orators to pour their hearts into, and a photographer to immortalize the gathering's most precious moments. Owing to the Muslim School's geographical importance and the sentimental connection some of the organizers had to it, its spacious grounds were chosen as the meeting place.

The conference was set to commence after the sun dipped below the horizon. Two young men ventured into the city, armed with a rickshaw and a loudspeaker, heralding the arrival of the momentous event. Another friend, as if answering an unspoken prayer, appeared with drapes to ensure the stage's adornment lacked nothing.

And so, the stage was set for the National Conference of Islamic Literature. As the main organizer, between attending to various arrangements, I contemplated the contents of my welcome speech. Up to this point, my understanding of welcome speeches dictated that shortcomings and unpreparedness be spun as achievements – after all,

hadn't the world's greatest revolutions been led by those with empty hands?
Occasionally, I'd pause, wondering if this approach was too traditional – and if so, what truly set our conference apart? The rickshaw-riding announcers also grappled with whose name to mention in their announcements, as the masses had always gathered in the name of a revered spiritual leader, a prodigious poet, or an unparalleled leader.

Upon our arrival at the venue, a scene of chaos and disorganization unfolded before our eyes. The school administrators had neglected even the most basic arrangements, but in a swift whirlwind of action, the situation was brought under control. The stage blossomed to life, and benches sprouted like daisies on the lawn, inviting the audience to nestle in their embrace. Timely as the setting sun, the audience began to trickle in.
Amidst the sea of faces, the late Syed Shah Asadullah, adorned in his traditional attire and emanating a celestial radiance, was deemed worthy of presiding over the gathering. Brother Ejaz, a young man whose flair for spirited conversation was a gift among our group, was selected to take the reins of anchoring. Little did we know, Ejaz's talent would propel him to become the Dean of Social Sciences at Jamia Millia in the future.

Days later, the public meeting graced the pages of newspapers in grand reports, with some weekly papers in Delhi even immortalizing the event through photographs. It was said that every speaker at the gathering was a scholar, a writer, or at the very least, considered an Islamic thinker. In the hazy world of words and opinions, 'Sangam' had declared me a renowned Urdu writer. And, as if on the wings of this whispered praise, an invitation from Ali Mian Sahib arrived, summoning me to participate in an Islamic literature program at Nadwa – a program that would later give birth to a literary movement of unparalleled significance.

People marveled at my seemingly overnight transformation into a famous Urdu writer. While it was true that my articles found homes in

newspapers and magazines during that time, those few pieces were hardly enough to earn such an illustrious title.
I recalled a story about a young Maulana Azad, who would stand on a crate, convincing his peers he was a great Maulana from Delhi, addressing a stage before a crowd of millions. When the children would protest, saying there was no one there but a few of them, he would assert that such was the nature of play. It was also said that one must create one's own titles – like a painter with a canvas, they must daub on the colors and shapes of their choosing. Abul Kalam Azad had introduced himself as Imam-ul-Hind, and thus, Imam-ul-Hind he became.
So, when I applied the famous writer formula, the arrow found its mark, and in that instance, the journey from student to famous writer and thinker appeared almost magically abbreviated. Whenever I saw someone adorned with titles such as Pir Tariqat, Qazi Sharia, Faqih Ummat, or Amir Sharia, instead of being awestruck, I simply acknowledged that, like me, they had donned these titles out of a childlike fascination.

As fame enveloped the renowned writer and thinker, it seeped into every crevice of the city, arousing curiosity and intrigue. One fateful day, a pair of representatives from the student organization Halqae Talaba approached me. They extended an invitation to their weekly gathering, where impassioned discussions of the Quran, Sunnah, and religious dominance took center stage. I knew I had to participate, to be a part of this intellectual whirlwind.

And so, it was my turn to speak. The Iranian revolution was on everyone's lips, a tidal wave of chaos and fervor. It electrified religious circles and gave birth to the resurgence of Shia-Sunni sectarian debates. The air was thick with confusion, and I couldn't help but think - why not make the Iranian revolution the focus of my talk? I was captivated by the vivid scenes of Khomeini's return to Tehran, the fervent masses ready to sacrifice everything for the cause. But the truth was obscured by the haze of propaganda from both supporters and adversaries.

The ignorance of Urdu newspapers only added to the chaos, mistakenly attributing Ayatollah Khomeini's name to Bani Sadr's picture. Reports of atrocities and doctrinal debates left readers unsure of where the truth lay. Leaflets from the Iranian embassy arrived at the library, but they were tainted with one-sided propaganda. It was then that I discovered some documents sent to the library of Jamia Salafia from the Iranian embassy. Among them was a speech by Ayatollah Khomeini, booklets praising the revolution's leader, and other propaganda materials.

I poured over these documents, carefully extracting key points from the speech and weaving them into a compelling narrative that focused on the unity of the Ummah. As I took the stage at the weekly gathering, I could feel the anticipation in the room, usually filled with thirty to thirty-five young people. However, that day, a middle-aged man was also present. The words poured out of me, infused with a fearless pursuit of truth in the face of adversity. As my speech came to an end, the middle-aged man erupted in applause, praising my courage in tackling the controversial topic. His words, a testament to the power of speaking out and challenging the status quo, only fueled my desire to continue down this path, unafraid of confronting the complexities of the world.

In those vibrant gatherings, the speeches that unfolded before us were like well-rehearsed performances. I was caught in the whirlwind of my own thoughts, trying to decipher if they genuinely appreciated my words or if this was just another form of veiled disapproval. I had mentioned in my impassioned speech, with a nod to the scholars' reservations, that the Iranian revolution had given birth to a world of unexplored possibilities. If we can stand behind the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence simply because they carry the essence of human dignity and intellectual freedom, then why can't the Iranian revolution, which has offered itself as the torchbearer for the unity of the Ummah and essentially represents a declaration of war by the downtrodden against the mighty, warrant our sincere blessings?

Any endeavor to escape the shackles of oppression is deserving of our unwavering support. After all, we hold the American Declaration of Independence in high esteem because it promises the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. From the core of the American revolution sprouted the French revolution, and the undeniable truth is that every voice that rises in defiance of the tyrannical system should be recognized as echoing "Verily, sovereignty belongs to Allah alone."

In the hazy twilight of ordinary weekly speeches, this one would have remained ensconced within the sacred walls of the mosque. But fate had other plans as this middle-aged man, like a fervent disciple, spread word of my speech throughout the city. One day, he graced the bookshop with his presence, showering me with such heartfelt and intoxicating praise that I couldn't help but drown in a pool of my own embarrassment.

As serendipity would have it, I bumped into him on my way back from the Maghrib prayer. He greeted me with a warmth that could set the world ablaze, exclaiming, "Your speech, it still reverberates in the caverns of my mind! You spoke the truth, the unadulterated, divine truth. Remember what Imam Ali said, 'I spoke the truth and was left alone.'"

Our impassioned exchange did not go unnoticed by a curious neighbor, who, upon the man's departure, addressed me in a tone that teetered between annoyance and concern, "What on Earth are you doing? Do you have any idea who that man is? He's a dyed-in-the-wool Shia, and these days, they're riding the crest of a wave. The Iranian revolution has only fanned the flames of their already blazing zeal."

As my neighbor became increasingly aware of my views on the Iranian revolution, his distress grew palpable. He brought me to his living room, determined to lay bare the malevolent actions of the Shia, their animosity towards the Sahaba, and their historical plots against Islam. The chilling revelations not only shook my intellectual self-assurance but also instilled a deep-seated fear within me, making me question

whether my reliance on my intellect and knowledge had inadvertently jeopardized my destiny.

That night was a harrowing one for me. I felt torn between the enticing calls of "neither Shia nor Sunni" and the terrifying realization that I had unwittingly become a victim of the conspiracies of the Sabai, a derogatory term for Shias. As he said his goodbyes, my neighbor offered a final warning, cautioning that those who fail to align with the majority often find themselves shunned by their communities. Even individuals with the most extraordinary talents have been cast aside, their potential squandered. He urged me to always refrain from expressing opinions that might clash with the majority's feelings and sensibilities.

It had been approximately five years since the Iranian revolution, and I found myself in the captivating presence of my revered mentor, Ja'far Zaki. Though his primary expertise lay in English literature, Professor Zaki possessed a profound grasp of Islamic history and culture. A man conversant with both Eastern and Western nuances, he exhibited a deep understanding of faith, his gaze perpetually fixed on the celestial heavens above. Each time I encountered him, it seemed as if he was enveloped in a luminous, otherworldly aura. While he identified with the Shia sect, his thoughts and actions remained impeccably free of even the slightest hint of sectarian bias.

One day, our conversation gently meandered towards the celebrated French philosopher Michel Foucault, who had sadly passed away just a few months prior, and his connection with the Iranian revolution. Our discourse was still in its nascent stages when another esteemed mentor of mine, Rafiq Ahmed Naqvi, serendipitously graced us with his presence.

As an avid reader of literature, I was well-acquainted with the writings of Foucault, but I had no inkling that he too had fervently supported the Iranian revolution. My surprise must have been evident, for Naqvi sahib, with his signature sardonic air, remarked: "Ah, you don't truly

know Foucault, do you? He was every bit as much of a Shia as anyone else. Have you ever laid eyes on his photograph? He bears an uncanny resemblance to a Shia, that same aura of foreboding clinging to his visage."

"Ah, ah, Naqvi sahib!" Jafar Zaki sahib made an effort to check his irreverent chum, perhaps considering his frankness inappropriate in my company. However, Naqvi sahib was far from easily silenced. His countenance was ever decorated with a lighthearted grin, a blend of his facial composition and the acerbic wit of his banter. He nostalgically recalled, "During my time in Lucknow, a Sunni acquaintance presumed I was Shia due to the 'Naqvi' affixed to my name. Upon learning I was Sunni, he exclaimed, 'Well, my brother, I was misguided by your name, not to mention your face as well...'" Naqvi sahib chuckled heartily and proceeded, "Western scholars have practically deified Foucault. His work is so vast that its aftershocks will be experienced for ages. And yet, how seldom do you encounter his name linked with the Iranian revolution? People rarely broach the subject of the articles he composed in the revolution's favor."

Foucault's fascination with the Iranian revolution kept bugging me, so I just had to ask my oh-so-wise professor what was it that pulled him into that whirlwind. He pondered for a moment and then said, "You see, Rashid, a deep-thinking mind doesn't split the world into some tired old East-West dichotomy. A truth-chaser? All they need is the faintest whisper of the real deal, and it doesn't really matter who's behind that voice or where it comes from. So, our friend Foucault? He made the trek to Iran not once but twice to witness the revolution up close and personal, sending back his sharp-as-a-tack observations to French and Italian papers. Now, when he first touched down in Iran, 'Black Friday' had gone down like two days before. Hundreds of souls lost to heartless police gunfire during those fiery Friday protests. But the thing is, the protests just kept burning, unrelenting. Foucault couldn't wrap his head around how, even with all that bloodshed, people still had courage pumping through their veins, fear nowhere in sight. He'd never come across a tribe of believers so utterly untouched

by dread. I mean, who were these people? And what was the spellbinding idea that fueled a collective fire for change within an entire nation? There's got to be some kind of secret sauce, something that sets the Iranian revolution apart from all those other earth-shattering revolutionary rumbles around the globe."

So like, other Western thinkers and journalists totally saw these things too, right? But Foucault, he was this super open-minded dude, and he was all about getting into the spiritual side of the Iranian revolution. He saw that people were, like, embracing it as a religious duty and stuff. The French Revolution was all secular and everything, but in Iran, it was a whole different vibe with spirituality and religiosity all around.
And you know what? The Iranian revolution came from the people, their culture and civilization, so they didn't need some outside force pushing modernization on them like the Shah of Iran did. Foucault called it the 'most modern' and 'most insane' thing ever because it was, like, challenging the Western way of life for the first time.
He really wanted people to get that religion wasn't against the revolution or hijacking it, but it was actually the driving force behind it. In Iran, religion isn't just a bunch of beliefs; it's part of everyday life, and you can see it everywhere you look.

So, how did Foucault manage to understand the revolution so deeply and even become a strong advocate for it?
When I asked this, the professor smiled and said, "You've read Shariati, right? His writings are very illuminating. For many Westerners, his work is thought-provoking and enlightening, capturing their attention with an Eastern perspective." He paused briefly, as if recalling something, and continued, "In Shia thought, there's this idea that, like Imam Hussein who gave himself up to God's will, his followers should practice Taqiyya and wait for the Hidden Imam. But Zaidi Shia has a different interpretation of Imam Hussein's actions. They believe he fought until the end, and we should strive against oppression through resistance rather than Taqiyya. Shariati explained this using terms like Alavi Shiism and Safavi Shiism. He

said that the real spirit of Shiism isn't in the 17th-century Shia institutions but in those speeches by Imam Ali, where he called on his followers to rise up and fight for justice."

Foucault was like, totally fascinated by the idea that this call for justice was just filled with spirituality, you know? It turned into this religious duty for people who followed it, and they started seeing it as a guarantee for their, like, ultimate success. Foucault made this super interesting point, and even though he couldn't remember where it was written, he said he'd show me if I ever stopped by. He talked about how people often quote Marx about religion being the opium of the masses, but they usually ignore the part right before that. Marx said that religion was the soul of a world that lost its, like, essence. So, Foucault was suggesting that the Islam that came up during the revolutionary days in 1978 shouldn't be seen as an opium, but more like a soul for a world that was missing its spirituality.

So where was there any doubt about him being a Shia? Mr. Naqvi, who had been silently listening to the conversation until now, felt a surge of emotion.
Professor Zaki smiled and said, "It amazes me how clear Foucault's understanding of Islam was. He considered the establishment of Islamic rule and the return to the era of the Prophet (PBUH) as commendable. However, Foucault's writings were neither appreciated in the East nor in the West."
"In the East, these books are popular: 'Two Contrasting Images' and 'Iranian Revolution, Imam Khomeini, and Shiism,'" Mr. Naqvi interjected again.
"Are you talking about Ali Mian Sahib?"
"Yes! And there's another gentleman, Manzoor Nomani. Their books are selling like hotcakes," Mr. Naqvi said.
"It's a shame, I'm amazed at the intellect of these esteemed scholars. If they couldn't speak in favor of the nation rising against American imperialism, they should have at least remained silent."
"How could they? The community was also asking what we should do about the Iranian Revolution. Maybe they were afraid that speaking

the truth might cause them to lose their grip on Sunnism. Speaking the truth is not easy, brother; it has never been easy," Mr. Naqvi said while standing up. The discussion concluded.

As my thoughts swirled, I couldn't help but concede that perhaps Mr. Naqvi had a point: uttering the truth is a daunting endeavor. Veiled in the guise of tact, many a word is spoken - words that, if said candidly, would bring about remorse for the speaker. Without divine intervention, the truth seems to catch in our throats, left unuttered. Foucault bared his soul on the Iranian Revolution, casting his thoughts to the wind and finding himself an outcast among his own people. In stark contrast, our Sunni scholars fanned the flames of contentious debates, forsaking research and analysis, while their adoring nation hoisted them upon a lofty pedestal. The more my thoughts wandered, the more Foucault, enigmatic though he was, emerged as a spiritual figure, standing in defiance of the dogmatic giants of faith. It seemed as if he had transcended the fear of being cast away from the hallowed halls of religious sanctity.

The following morning, my thoughts still consumed by the incident, I sought my father's wisdom on the matter. I questioned whether it was truly a transgression to lend one's voice in support of the Iranian Revolution. With a gentle smile, he responded, "How did you come across Maulvi Samee? These are but the quarrels of the clergy. Your responsibility is to engage your intellect, relentlessly pursue the truth, and trust that with sincerity in your heart, God will not abandon you. Speaking of which, there was an enlightening article in yesterday's newspaper that might pique your interest. I believe I left it here somewhere; pick it up."
Pausing for a moment, he continued, "A beacon of hope can be found in the evolution of Khomeini's writings. In 'Kashf al-Asrar,' one of his early works, he entertains the notion of a monarchy. Yet, in 'Islamic Government,' penned a few years before the revolution, he introduces the concept of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Wilayat al-Faqih) and wholly renounces the idea of a monarchy. In time, the term 'Mustad'afin' (the oppressed) emerges as the basis and justification for

the revolution in his writing. This progression suggests that Khomeini, in contrast to conventional Shia scholars, is consistently seeking the path of righteousness. Most significantly, rather than idly awaiting the return of the Hidden Imam, he urges the entire Shia nation to unite and purify themselves. In doing so, when the Imam finally arrives, he will find his followers in an elevated and organized state."

My father's conversation was still ongoing when I found the central page of the newspaper, featuring a lengthy article spread across the entire page. In some places, the writer had quoted excerpts from a recent interview with Khomeini, where he had told a La Monde reporter, in response to the question of what kind of state he wanted to create in Iran, that he desired an Islamic People's State. When the representative sought clarification if he meant an 'Islamic Democratic Republic,' Khomeini plainly stated that it was solely an Islamic Republic – nothing more, nothing less. When asked what he meant by an Islamic Republic, he explained that the term republic meant what it usually does; however, it would be called an Islamic Republic because the roots of their system would be grounded in Islam. Nevertheless, it would be up to the people to determine its exact form and structure.
I closed the newspaper as my father's conversation continued. He said, "Only God knows the true state of our hearts and is aware of the future. For a student of knowledge, it is enough to continue the quest for truth. The truth is indeed a proud entity; it cannot be attained without sincere pursuit, and if not cherished, it may slip through our fingers even when it is within reach."

Maulvi Sami, a master of weaving intricate theological conundrums, had this talent for leaving his audience utterly baffled. He had a seemingly endless list of unsolvable quandaries, which, truth be told, were crafted to flaunt his vast knowledge. One day, he regaled them with a tale of a caravan on a journey, only to be ambushed and plundered by ruthless bandits. In the chaos, two men met their demise; their grieving wives, who traveled with the caravan, cried out in despair. A saintly figure, moved by their heart-wrenching sobs, appeared and performed a miraculous deed: he placed the severed

heads of the two men back onto their lifeless bodies, beseeched the heavens, and by God's grace, the heads reattached themselves. Both men sprang back to life, as if they had never left.

The story, brimming with the enchanting charm of saintly miracles, took an unfortunate turn when one man's head found itself attached to the other's body. The women, now bewildered and distressed, were left to ponder the identity of their true husbands. If they were to recognize their spouses by their heads, what would become of the stranger's body? The conundrum remained unresolved, and even now, Maulvi Sami's scholarly reputation rests upon this enigmatic question.

On another occasion, he mused, "If God is indeed omnipotent, can He create a stone of such immense weight that He Himself cannot lift it?" At times, he would delve into the profound mysteries of the Prophet's ascension, its physical and spiritual aspects; sometimes, he would scrutinize the minutiae of Jesus's second coming with such exactitude that it seemed as if he were gazing upon the future itself. He would occasionally cast doubt upon the salvation of Abu Talib, and other times, he would speak of the Prophet's life after his passing in such a manner that suggested he had just returned from the sacred presence.

In those days, on the brink of the fifteenth century, a palpable sense of anticipation hummed through the air. Maulvi Sami, an enigmatic figure, infused the traditions of the Mahdi's emergence with his own boundless imagination, casting a shimmering promise of a bright morning upon the hearts of the people. It was as if the whole world held its breath.

One fateful day, as Maulvi Sami accidentally bumped into me while coming out of the mosque, he hurriedly shared the news. "Do you know what happened? I told you these Sabaites wouldn't stay quiet. What I feared has happened. The Meccan Haram is under siege." With those cryptic words, he went on his way.
Driven by an insatiable curiosity, I went home and scoured every source I could find, trying to piece together the truth. American media

was quick to lay the blame at the feet of the Iranians, while Ayatollah Khomeini pointed the finger right back at the Americans, his words dripping with indignation. The Americans were left sputtering, but Khomeini's accusations fanned the flames of public anger, sparking violent protests at American embassies in Muslim-majority countries. And while the world reeled, the Holy Kaaba remained under siege for fourteen interminable days.

As the days bled into each other, the marketplace seethed with whispers and rumors. One Delhi-based newspaper, 'Dawat,' published a special pictorial issue, filled with images of revolutionaries who had fallen during the conflict at the Holy site. The ominous caption below their pictures read: "What befell them in this life is but a warning; contemplating their fate in the afterlife makes us shudder."
When the dust finally settled and the truth revealed itself, it became clear that neither the Sabaite conspiracy nor the Americans had any part to play in the siege. The culprit was an unexpected one, a protest born from the heart of the Salafi movement within Saudi Arabia itself. And so, the world was left to grapple with the profound implications of this revelation.

I had managed to unveil the secrets behind Maulvi Sami's enigmatic revelations, yet when faced with the complex tapestry of his theological riddles and divine conundrums, I found myself utterly lost. Hoping for guidance, I turned to my father, seeking a semblance of clarity in the context of Jesus's life and the appearance of the Mahdi. I recalled the countless impassioned debates that unfolded in the bookshop, their focus on shadowy prophethood of Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani. My mind swam with the echoes of those debates, and I found myself drawing on the familiar pages of the fourth volume of Tafheem-ul-Quran, a compendium of traditions woven together like an intricate tapestry. With bated breath, I awaited my father's wise counsel, a beacon of light to illuminate the enigma before me. But the answer I sought was not to be found. My father's eyes twinkled with amusement as he beheld my innocent bewilderment. He paused, savoring the moment, before suggesting, "Have you seen Armaghan-e-

Hijaz? Bring it." I fetched the elusive tome, my heart pounding with anticipation.

As my father flipped through the pages, he gestured to a poem, titled 'Iblis's Council of Advisors.' I began to read, my voice trembling, until I reached these verses:

> In chants of Takbeer, the spells of six realms break,
> Let not this god-thinker's darkest night find light's embrace.
> Has Mary's son met his end, or does he live eternally,
> God's attributes distinct, or part of His divine essence, truly?
> For Muslims in this age, is it not enough to see,
> The tarnished idols of theology, as Laat and Manat cease to be?[xviii]

In a swirl of revelations, a semblance of understanding found its way to me. Delving further, I unearthed the truth that this very list of intellectual exchanges, skillfully extracted by Iqbal from Iblis's council, was indeed ancient – even the great Iqbal had fallen for deception here. My intuition whispered to me that my father, rather than imposing a predetermined belief about the future, desired to let this enigma blossom, unfurling under the gentle touch of our own thoughts and investigations.

A melancholic haze had enveloped the aspirations of an Islamic renaissance after the untimely demise of the new century's reformist claimant in the sacred haven of Mecca. Merely weeks had passed since this tragic occurrence when the relentless Russian invasion in Afghanistan gave rise to yet another tribulation for the Ummah.

Jehayman Al-Otaybi and his four hundred comrades, with visions of the siege, entered the hallowed sanctuary of Mecca, perhaps believing they would guide King Khalid in the inaugural prayer of the new century. They must have thought their audacious act would signal the beginning of a reinvigorated era for the Ummah. Regrettably, their hope for a brighter dawn met a gruesome end amid carnage and devastation.

I couldn't help but wonder, what would unfold next? Would the Islamic awakening surmount the arduous ascent or falter along the way? I endeavored to glimpse into the future's veiled windows, but my knowledge was painfully inadequate, and the questions, profound. The thought crossed my mind that God's world is boundless; why not venture further and unravel the mysteries that lie ahead?

16
Embracing Transformation

My father wore that troubled look again today, the same one that's been haunting me. The well-worn pages of Hamail Sharif were still in his grip, his fingers wedged in between as though he froze mid-recitation, suspended in a silent scream. It was like he was on the brink of saying something, but some inexplicable force made him choose silence. His eyes, once lively, now drifted to the void and occasionally landed on me. I hung in there, waiting for an instruction, maybe to fetch a book or read out some obscure footnotes - but nothing. It was as if, today, he was more interested in hearing my voice, my words. I tried to gather my courage, but before I could give voice to a single thought, I was yanked back into consciousness. My first morning in Aligarh - still jarring from the journey, heart heavy with sleep, and a dream that had stolen my peace. Memories of bookshop gatherings flooded in, and a tidal wave of thoughts left me gasping for air. I found myself sitting upright, feeling as if I'd been drafted by the universe for some grand mission, as if time was running out on me to decipher a puzzling array of distressing questions.

"In those days, an electric charge filled the air, a contagious excitement spreading everywhere about the impending fifteenth Hijri century celebrations. Even in Aligarh, the student pulse was racing. The Islamic Student Movement, their heartbeat strong and determined, were organizing a dizzying array of events. Seminars. Debates. Rallies. Marches. A whirlwind of speech and writing competitions. Poetry readings. Cultural programmes. It was like the vibrant colors of spring had exploded early.

The hub of this revolution, the national office of the Movement, was nestled in Badar Bagh. That's where I was heading, my hands clutching a topic for the writing competition. I arrived to find the president's room a battlefield of words. Sparks flew as a man, passion burning in his eyes, argued that the Iranian Revolution was the true

embodiment of the Islamic Movement. Saudi Arabia, he asserted, was playing a dangerous game of deception in the name of the Islamic Call - a dance with infidelity.

Arguments clashed, ideas wrestled, and while every voice had its reasons, one truth was undeniably clear: the Iranian Revolution had ignited a firestorm of debate among those serving the call of faith. It had unsheathed swords of contention, not in a literal sense, but in the battlefield of ideas and beliefs."

During those days, the university campus was a melting pot of Iranian students, and confrontations between them were a common sight. At times, these altercations would escalate into bloodshed. Whenever I encountered Iranian students, they seemed to be barely holding themselves together. I remember vividly a few months prior, a delegation of Iranian students at a conference in Nagpur struggling to articulate themselves clearly and straightforwardly. The truth was that the Iranian nation had experienced a revolutionary process that had upended its internal dynamics. It was hardly surprising that they lacked the ability to convey this profound shift in thought and perspective. And so, when these young individuals attempted to speak, they found it challenging to determine where to start and where to finish. As a result, their speeches often transformed into impassioned outbursts after just a few sentences.

In that very conference at Nagpur, when a youthful relative of Ali Miyan graced the stage as his proxy, he kicked off his speech with a verse about the Iranian revolution, saying, "I could never call poison candy." It sent a wave of unrest and discomfort rippling through the crowd. By this time, the debate in Aligarh's Islamic circles had reached a fever pitch—was the Iranian revolution truly Islamic or not? Meanwhile, those in favor of the Iranian revolution denounced Sunni scholars tied to Saudi Arabia as infidels, polytheists, and American agents. To grasp the situation, just imagine that Saudi-Iranian politics were on the rise in Islamic circles, with Shia-Sunni tensions providing a convenient disguise.

One day, I found myself asking Behzad, "When will this cycle of mutual bloodshed and violence come to an end?" A student of urban studies, Behzad possessed a unique calmness in his fervor and restraint in his conversations compared to other Iranian students. He would assert his decisions but also leave room for dialogue with those who disagreed. We were hostel neighbors, and he was a good one at that. A perpetual smile adorned his face, and he seemed to take a special delight in sipping tea under a tree on the grass. One day, he lamented the mutual hostilities among Iranian students. "Just yesterday, we were united in overthrowing the Shah," he mused, "and now we thirst for one another's blood." Yet, he remained confident that Imam Khomeini would find a solution to the problem. Intrigued, I asked Behzad, "What is it that inspires such extraordinary faith in the Imam, and why do you call him 'Imam'? The advent of the Imam of the time is still to come, isn't it?"
Behzad smiled at my inquiry. "Your objection is valid," he conceded. "How did you come to grasp such subtleties? Officially, his status is that of a deputy Imam. But public enthusiasm and uproar have led to the omission of the word 'deputy.' We don't see him as a substitute for the Hidden Imam; rather, they are merely his deputies and servants, paving the way for the Imam before his arrival. Their highest status can be that of a guardian jurist. Khomeini is performing the guardianship of state affairs in this capacity, and this isn't entirely foreign to Shiite intellectual circles. During the Safavid era, the Safavid rulers were granted the justification to rule in the capacity of deputy Imam."

Then, why won't the opponents accept his religious status? He said, with a sense of urgency: The heart of the matter lies in the fact that communists and secularists are petrified of the idea of a clerics' government taking root in Iran. Much like how, in your homeland, India, clerics aren't seen as suitable for politics or governance, so too in our Iran, it's believed that becoming a mullah is simple, but evolving into a true human being is a monumental challenge. For some, the thought of accepting that Imam Khomeini is not just an ordinary cleric

but a visionary with an insight rivaling the towering heights of the Himalayas is a bitter pill to swallow. He has nurtured a cohort of students that defies the expectations of a traditional seminary. In Shia thought, scholars have long held a central role—you must have heard of Wahid Behbahani or Baqir Majlisi? The latter is even accused of causing intellectual stagnation in Shi'ism.

But let's set these matters aside. The foundation of a principled school of thought was laid by these great scholars. They were given the authority to offer guidance and enlightenment for ordinary people, grounded in the Quran, Sunnah, consensus, and reason. During the Qajar era, Mulla Ahmad Naraqi formulated arguments supporting the rule of scholars amidst the Imam's occultation.

Shia Iran has consistently been reminded, through gatherings at sacred tombs, that scholars have, to some extent, upheld the work of the Imamate during the Imam's absence—or at least, they bear the responsibility of keeping the memory alive. The gatherings that once symbolized the struggle of Husayn against Yazid now embody the living revolution of Khomeini against the Shah. On one hand, Khomeini has assumed the role of Wilayat-e-Faqih as the deputy Imam; on the other, the Shah of Iran, a puppet of Western powers built on tyranny and oppression, has been banished from the nation.

For us, there remains no other path but to persist in our unwavering support for Imam Khomeini in this crucial battle between disbelief and Islam.

Behzad emerged as a remarkably deep individual, a revelation that caught me by surprise. There was an unanticipated seriousness and balance to our conversation, considering his initially reserved demeanor. Iranian students, in general, were thought to have limited interest in reading and writing, and they frequently faced challenges expressing themselves in English. In my class, there was an Iranian student named Chiragh who was often absent. One day, when the professor reprimanded him, he responded, "Sorry, sir, I go Delhi, not here." A knowing smile spread across the professor's face as he retorted with feigned rigidity, "No, no Delhi, here, here only." While lighthearted interactions like these were common with foreign

students, the depth and maturity of Behzad's thoughts stood in stark contrast, revealing that he was a man who belonged to a world apart.

One day, the Iranian Students Association organized an exhibition, and it was as if a beautiful storm of Iranian posters had swept through the campus. These posters carried the essence of a culture, decorated with Quranic verses, quotes from Imam Khomeini, and glimpses of the Iranian Revolution. The once Westernized students' rooms, once filled with movie star images and quotes from renowned Western scholars, now embraced the vibrant Iranian spirit.
In this whirlwind of art and history, Behzad stood tall, respected and admired. The exhibition also featured a speech by a speaker from Delhi, who passionately explained that the Iranian Revolution was a shared treasure for the entire Muslim community, transcending the boundaries of Sunni-Shia divisions. The powerful words of Iqbal Lahori and the revolutionary writings of Sayyid Qutb breathed life into this movement, forming the foundation of a revolution.
The revelation that Khomeini's close disciple Khamenei, who later ascended to the esteemed position of Grand Ayatollah, had himself published Persian translations of two of Qutb's books, left me in awe. The bond between these intellectual giants was further solidified when the founder of the Fada'iyan-e-Islam, Navvab Safavi, journeyed to Egypt in 1954 with the sole purpose of meeting Sayyid Qutb. Their united vision of divine governance and resistance against modern ignorance inspired a shared belief in the importance of a united Sunni-Shia struggle to counter the encroaching Westernization.

Even before Khomeini rose to prominence, the seeds of Sunni revolutionary thought had taken root in the hearts and minds of Iranians. To view the Iranian Revolution as solely a product of Shia thought would be a grave injustice. Khomeini's special representative, Ibrahim Yazdi, nurtured connections with the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood across Western countries, while Ali Shariati's tireless efforts added fuel to the revolutionary fire. This remarkable fusion of intellectual influences ultimately shaped the Iranian Revolution, a testament to the power of unity and the strength of shared purpose.

As I returned from the exhibition, my thoughts were consumed by this burning question: What's stopping us from embracing the revolution, which has been fueled by the contributions of Sunni thinkers, as a shared bounty? The fear that the Muslim nations of the Gulf harbor towards the Iranian revolution baffles me, but what's even more perplexing is the persistent opposition by Sunni scholars, who are regarded as the vanguard of the Islamic awakening in Arab countries. One can't help but wonder what drives them to maintain such a stance against the Iranian revolution.

One day, as I ambled back to the hostel, I unexpectedly encountered Behzad. He greeted me with an infectious enthusiasm and promptly invited me to join him for a cup of tea, an offer I couldn't resist. As we settled in, he retrieved a small booklet from his cupboard and extended it towards me, explaining that it was a humble gift containing the works of my revered teacher. He urged me to read it attentively, assuring me that every word was saturated with the spirit of revolution. "I simply can't do it justice," he admitted, "you'll just have to experience it for yourself." My eyes scanned the booklet, recognizing the name Ali Shariati—a name I was acquainted with, but whose writings had, until that moment, eluded my grasp.

Shariati and the revered teacher? I was startled. I couldn't help but ask, "What's your connection with Shariati? Have you ever met him?" My question seemed to ignite a surge of pride and joy across his face, and for a few moments, he went silent, seemingly lost in thought. Then he spoke, "The memories of our teacher's gatherings are the treasures I hold dear; I'll never forget them. They're like cherished heirlooms in my heart's gallery. Those moments were truly magical when our teacher spoke, and for us newcomers, it was as if our hearts and minds were being cleansed of all the dust and grime. Each gathering would infuse us with a newfound confidence; it was like our eyes were finally opening and the darkness was lifting."
As he spoke, Behzad seemed to drift away into another world. I realized my initial impression of him was spot-on—Behzad was indeed

a profound soul. I attempted to catch a glimpse into his eyes, which seemed to be lost in days gone by. He went on: "It's hard to express the impact of the teacher's gatherings. When he delivered a sermon at Hosseiniyeh Ershad, the atmosphere electrified the youth. Just one encounter with him was enough to transform a person's entire intellectual and spiritual universe."

Now it dawned on me that Behzad had been brought up in the world of traditional academia. I curiously inquired, "How long did you have the chance to immerse yourself in Shariati's teachings?" He responded, "While my foundational education took place in Qom, the few months I got to experience at Hosseiniyeh Ershad with Shariati were nothing short of life-changing. He showed us how to approach criticism and develop an authentic understanding of the world. It was his presence that gifted us these insights. It's such a shame, though, that his teachings are fading into obscurity, with people seeing him as a captive of Western philosophy and Marxism. Sure, he acquainted us with the likes of Fanon and Sartre, but he never blindly endorsed the West. Instead, he employed their ideas as tools for critical analysis."
"Under his guidance, we, who were otherwise confined to the traditional halls of academia, gained the ability to navigate and critique foreign thoughts and philosophies. Shariati urged us to fling open the doors of our hearts and minds, letting in the light from every direction and angle, embracing intellectual freedom and shedding our reservations."

Behzad's words revealed a deep-seated frustration over Shariati's mistreatment by the people of Iran. I couldn't help but ask, "Why is it that Shariati isn't embraced by the post-revolutionary government, and that he isn't widely recognized as an intellectual force behind the revolution?"
His reaction to my question seemed as if I had unintentionally poked an open wound. He said, "You see, politics has its own ulterior motives. Sure, Shariati came from a family of traditional scholars, but his higher education was in France. That's where he encountered the French philosopher Sartre, and it was during that time that he

translated Fanon's works into Farsi. These connections cast a shadow over Shariati's reputation in the post-revolutionary Iran. Imam Khomeini branded Shariati's writings as an example of 'Westoxification,' or the infiltration of Western ideas. It was like a declaration that Shariati would not be granted the status of an intellectual founder of the Iranian revolution in the future." The pain and disillusionment in Behzad's voice were palpable as he spoke of the unfortunate fate of a man he so deeply admired.

In response to my inquiry, a flicker of surprise danced across his face before he regained composure. He mused, "It's possible that the Imam may have misinterpreted Shariati, and it could also be because he chose to dismantle the prevalent Safavid Shiism – which, in his view, had become a faith centered around mourning. In contrast, Alawi Shiism represents a faith of martyrdom that emboldens us to voice the truth, even when faced with the most perilous of circumstances. We might have become entangled in the nuances of terms and phrasings, causing the core truth to slip from our grasp, veiled by the intricacies of language."

What do you mean? I didn't quite understand. Behzad continued, his voice imbued with passion, "During the public referendum following the revolution, a proposal emerged suggesting that Iran should become an Islamic Democratic Republic. The term 'democracy' elicited strong objections from Imam Khomeini at the time. He vehemently opposed the idea, arguing that Islam needs no additional labels. The mere word 'Islam' suffices for us. Iran would be an Islamic Republic - nothing less and nothing more. While the principle behind this argument was indeed valid, the unintended consequence was that Shariati became perceived as an interpreter of Western terminology rather than a fierce critic of the West. Consequently, it grew difficult for a purely Islamic thinker to garner support outside of the scholarly circles."
Behzad paused for a moment, then continued, "Yet, today, those who embody humanity within the circle of scholars owe much of their foundation to the late master's speeches and writings. Let us set aside these matters for now. Shariati will forever live on through his literary

works; he needs no endorsement from any state." A hint of protest resonated in Behzad's voice, and witnessing his unwavering devotion and loyalty to his mentor, I felt a deep love for him. I picked up the booklet and, with a fondness for our next meeting, took my leave.

17
The Scarlet Chaos

The vibrant display of the Iranian Revolution set the stage for a fascinating conflict on campus. A motley crew of Arab student associations, filled with a diverse mix of Palestinian, Iraqi, and Yemeni students, found themselves compelled to stand against the tidal wave of the Iranian Revolution's influence. A flurry of small and large programs sprouted from the Arab associations, painting the Iran-Iraq War as an intricate dance between Arab-Persian and Shia-Sunni paradigms.

Saddam Hussein, the enigmatic figure at the heart of it all, initially fancied himself as a champion of Arab culture in opposition to the Persians when he sashayed into Iran. Yet, as the support of Arab Sunni states for Hussein unfurled, the war took on an eerie hue of Shia-Sunni conflict. The Iraqi Shiites, once fervent supporters of Saddam, found their zeal fading away as the war became tangled in the web of Shia-Sunni relations.

In a dramatic twist, the Syrian government, a proud ally of Islamic Iran, ruthlessly crushed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in Hama, condemning over 20,000 Brotherhood members to a tragic end. The Brotherhood, in theory, cheered for the Iranian Revolution from the sidelines, but the cruel irony of their fate at the hands of the Iran-backed Assad regime was not lost on them.

The situation was a dizzying kaleidoscope of confusion - Shia-Sunni, Arab-Persian, the clash of faith and disbelief, or perhaps, just the raw, unbridled pursuit of power? In the end, one can't help but ponder the true driving force lurking behind these tumultuous, blood-soaked episodes.

One day, as I lounged in Behzad's room, absorbed in the whimsical atmosphere, Mahmood sauntered by. Mahmood, the ever-enigmatic secretary of the Arab Union, was a curious blend of liberal-mindedness and an infectious sense of humor. He often rapped on my door at the

crack of dawn, rousing me for prayers, yet he remained a ghostly presence, never to be found in the mosque himself.
One day, curiosity gnawed at me and I inquired about his constant absence from prayers. With a sly grin, he retorted that by shaking us awake for our daily communion with the divine, he earned his celestial rewards; his task, he insisted, was far from trivial.
Mahmood, still basking in the afterglow of his recent return from his homeland, recounted the travails of his journey. He lamented the absence of direct flights and the ensuing tribulations that plagued him. However, with a playful smirk, he dismissed his woes, musing that traveling with a touch of royal flair carried its own distinct pleasures. "Royal Jordanian Airlines," the name itself dripped with opulence and grandeur.
And then, with a conspiratorial whisper, he confided his foreboding: the days of Arab nobility seemed destined to grow darker, as if humanity was inching toward a terrifying, cataclysmic war.

Yes, you're totally right! It's like we're witnessing the birth of a conflict that could stretch on and on, consuming the whole region. Behzad's eyes widened with concern as he spoke.
He went on, "But you know, it's not just the Iran-Iraq war that has me worried. It's the undercurrents I feel simmering throughout the entire Islamic world. It's like we're on the brink of our very own Thirty Years' War, and once those religious fires start burning, they're going to be so hard to put out."
"Ugh, foreign powers just want to see us tear each other apart," Behzad lamented, trying to defend the revolution. "They're hoping the passion and energy from the Iranian Revolution will get all tangled up in a Shia-Sunni conflict."
"But you know, both sides are messing up here," he continued, striking a more balanced tone. "We can't just point fingers at the Arab governments. Iran is working its own agenda, too. Like, they know that the Shia population in various Arab countries will act as their proxies, and they're actively trying to organize them. So, it's kind of hard to believe that their invitation to unite is really all that pure and untainted, you know?"

Indeed, the Imam has called for the unity of the downtrodden, as Bahzad so eloquently added. Yet, we must observe the ongoing events and consider the reality of the situation, as Mahmood insisted. In the wake of the Iranian Revolution, a remarkable tumult has arisen within the Shiite sphere. Ambitious plans are afoot to rally the Shiite communities in Afghanistan, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. With half of Iraq's population being Shiite, and Shiites holding the majority in Bahrain, it's noteworthy that Imam Khomeini recently advised a Kuwaiti Shiite delegation to create a party that can unify the oppressed on a global scale.

Presently, Sunni nations grapple with the challenge of controlling their Shiite populations. A recent news report from London's Al-Dastoor magazine unveiled the emergence of a clandestine society in Al-Ahsa, an eastern Saudi Arabian region with a Shiite populace. In Beirut, the organizers rallying under the banner of Hezbollah have an unmistakable sectarian identity. So, how can we assert that the Iranian Revolution is a program of Shiism, rather than a revival of Islam? While the restoration of the Islamic world's grandeur may be your ultimate goal, it appears that you seek to accomplish this with the support of your Shiite compatriots. Wherever a Shiite population exists, you envision it as a revolutionary bastion and utilize state resources to reorganize it.

This approach understandably sparks unease within the Sunni world. In fact, I contend that the Iranian government has inadvertently granted Arab states the chance to counter Shiite aggression by positioning themselves as defenders of Sunni Islam.

"But there's something else, something that bewilders and concerns us," I expressed with a hint of worry.

"What might that be?" Mahmood inquired curiously.

The perplexing aspect is how those Arab-Islamic organizations, which we have come to associate with the Islamic awakening, as well as the esteemed leaders revered for their profound Islamic thought, have so readily joined in this sectarian strife. Now, we find ourselves in a world where the champions of the awakening fervently advocate for

Sunni Islam. The landscape of the Islamic world has become politically and intellectually cleaved into two distinct factions. The leadership of Shiite Islam is firmly in the hands of revolutionary Iran, while Sunni Islam finds itself guided by Saudi Arabia, which garners the support of those aligned with Salafi/Ikhwan Islamic ideals. With both sides zealously hoisting the banner of Islam, they tirelessly labor for the interests of their respective political patrons. Amidst this tumultuous chaos, the essence of Islam itself appears to have been swallowed by the shadows, no longer in clear view. I elucidated with a sense of lament.

"Your point holds some truth," Bahzad acknowledged, a thoughtful expression on his face. "The leaders of this Islamic renaissance must bear their share of responsibility for the volatile state of affairs we now find ourselves in. I'd even go so far as to suggest that they have deliberately closed their eyes to the true nature of the situation. They, more than anyone else, should be able to appreciate the revitalizing impact the Iranian Revolution has had on the Islamic world. The end of American imperialism in Iran represents a beacon of hope for the entire region. So, how is it that, in these pivotal moments when Islam and its followers need solidarity, they opt to align themselves with the opposing forces instead of offering their support to the revolution?"

"Yes, it is indeed puzzling and somewhat distressing. What is your opinion, why do Sunni Islamists prefer an American-backed monarchy over the leadership of Imam Khomeini? Have the worldly temptations blinded the eyes of the leaders of the Islamic Awakening, or is there another reason?" I asked Mahmood for his opinion.
He said, "I am not saying that Sunni scholars and religious movements have compromised their afterlife; that would be a huge audacity. However, I do believe that these people have failed to analyze events and incidents correctly, and ultimately, some due to their naivety and some due to their complacency, have been led astray."
In actuality, the unfolding of events is such that I find myself struggling to adequately convey their implications. To truly grasp the matter at hand, one must dive into the intricate backstory of Juhayman

al-Otaibi's movement. This enigmatic figure has become the subject of widespread public misconceptions. A recently published book from Kuwait, titled "Saurah fi Rehab Makkah," sheds some light on the subject.

Juhayman belongs to the second or third generation of the Saudi Ikhwans, a group that had played an instrumental role in assisting Abdulaziz Ibn Saud during the establishment of the Saudi state. The Ikhwan is an authentic, Bedouin Salafi Islamic movement, not to be conflated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Juhayman's opposition was stirred upon witnessing Saudi Arabia's seemingly irreversible march toward Westernization. His vehement protests landed him and some of his associates behind bars, only to be released later due to the intervention of Sheikh Bin Baz, a respected mentor of Juhayman's.

However, Juhayman's siege of the Sacred Mosque of Mecca at the dawn of the fifteenth century, and his presentation of Abdullah Qahtani as a renewer of the new century, pushed Sheikh Bin Baz past the point of endorsement. The Muslim world was left reeling from the ordeal. The Saudi government had no recourse but to evacuate the Sacred Mosque by force. Although Juhayman ultimately met his demise, his criticism of the Saudi government's pro-Western stance endured.

Iran, seeking leadership of the Islamic world, found itself in a competitive struggle with the Saudi government. With no other options, the Saudi government was compelled to adopt a policy in service of Islam—one that would outshine Iran while simultaneously invalidating Juhayman's grievances. Thus, the state resolved to sponsor Salafi scholars, who were viewed as custodians and leaders of the Islamic awakening, influenced by the Egyptian Ikhwan.

A rivalry ignited between the Saudi and Iranian states in their pursuit of Islamic service. Imam Khomeini, deputy to the Supreme Leader, vied for leadership alongside Shah Fahd, who preferred the title of "Servant of the Two Holy Mosques" over "His Majesty the King." It was during this turbulent time that the Soviet eviction in Afghanistan transpired, leading the United States to sponsor the Afghan Jihad—a campaign in which both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were destined to play pivotal roles.

And thus, the domino effect unfolded before their very eyes. Mahmoud halted for an instant, his hands gesticulating to emphasize the two opposing camps. He resumed, "As Iran's Islamic Revolution called for unity and change, Saudi Arabia found itself with the awakening's leaders, the Islamic movements, and the grand vision of Islamic Jihad against Communist Russia, guided by American influence. An alternative tale of Sunni Jihad emerged, battling against a God-despising Russia. The magnetism of this story was undoubtedly stronger. This fresh narrative unfolded and advanced with such haste that the awakening's leaders couldn't grasp the full implications of the transformation; they were simply content that their government, having learned from the siege of the Sacred Mosque, decided to adopt a pro-Islamic stance within their homeland. Juhayman and his comrades had made the ultimate sacrifice, yet the extraordinary creative energy that sprung forth propelled the awakening's leaders to traverse the globe, attending gatherings and conferences. Little did they know they had become cogs in the American foreign policy machine, all under the banner of Jihad and proselytizing."

I found myself utterly astonished by Mahmoud's insight. Up until now, the conversations I'd heard within Islamic circles always carried an undercurrent of unease. Yet Mahmoud, in what felt like a masterstroke, managed to weave together these disparate threads, revealing a vivid, coherent portrait of the situation at hand.

On a bone-chilling winter evening some years later, there I was, huddled in a cozy corner of a Peshawar restaurant with a handful of friends. Our conversation swirled around the subject of the Afghan Jihad. Out of the blue, a gentleman dropped a bombshell, claiming that the American secret agency was showing an extraordinary interest in distributing and publishing the Quran in the Russian-influenced areas. At first, his words seemed cryptic and baffling, but as he elaborated on the large-scale printing of Uzbek translations of the Quran, the pieces started falling into place. The American war gurus

were betting on using this strategy to spread Jihad into the inner recesses of the Soviet Union, and potentially bring it to its knees.
Could they be orchestrating our fiery zeal for Jihad to serve their own agenda? His response caught me off guard: "We are actually the ones manipulating them. Think about it – we've got their money, their weapons, their technology, and they're compelled to back us in our fight against the Russians. They're all too aware that we're the ones capable of halting the Red Army's advance. They're more than happy to disseminate the Uzbek translation of the Quran to ensure the flames of Jihad infiltrate the very heart of the Soviet Union."
His revelations only fueled my apprehension. I inquired, "Is it possible that the Islamic movement – long dreaming of an independent state and forever steeling itself for the ultimate sacrifices – is being emotionally and psychologically hijacked by the tentacles of American imperialism? And are we, swept up in the fervor of Jihad, blind to this insidious reality? After all, why on earth would the Americans be interested in promoting the Quran?"

He replied, his eyes glistening with fervor, "My friend, don't you see? God works in mysterious ways, and who are we to question His plan? Perhaps He's chosen to bestow upon the Americans the honor of carrying His book."
I countered, "I understand your point, but it's not as simple as just carrying the Quran. We cannot ignore the fact that the Americans haven't truly accepted the book into their hearts. They're just exploiting our passion for Jihad to further their own capitalistic desires. They're well aware that a Muslim can willingly give their life for martyrdom, inspired by the verses of the Quran. So, they're using translations of the Quran to ignite life in the strategically significant regions of Uzbekistan where Muslims have been dormant for so long. But we must not forget, their ultimate goal isn't to establish a just system; it's to strengthen their own imperialistic reach and conquer."
He leaned in, a mischievous glint in his eyes, "Only time will reveal who has truly used whom. After all, given our circumstances, can we really afford to turn away from the bountiful aid offered by the

Americans? Embracing their assistance with gratitude is our only choice."

Our conversation continued, unraveling the intricate threads that wove together our current reality. It was a complex tapestry of passion, politics, and purpose, leaving us to ponder where the lines between right and wrong, friend and foe, had begun to blur.

18
Nurturing Minds

Merely weeks after stepping foot in Aligarh, I found myself in the midst of the captivating presence of the city's eminent intellectual and visionary, Ahmed Surti Sahab. Esteemed and revered, Surti Sahab shared his wisdom as a professor of General Education. He illuminated the minds of first-year students, imparting the essence of Science and Society. The ethos of General Education lay in bridging the gaps of comprehension caused by specialization, unearthing the intricacies of collective knowledge across diverse domains. As a result, art students delved into the realm of science, exploring the social ramifications and the societal transformations arising from groundbreaking scientific discoveries.

The air was charged with excitement, as we found ourselves entrenched in a passionate classroom debate, the kind that leaves a lasting impression on your soul. We dove deep into the gray areas of values - good and evil, right and wrong, seeking meaning in a world where certainty seemed an illusion. Surti Sahab, the charismatic conductor of our intellectual symphony, gently questioned our long-held beliefs, making us feel like we were unraveling an endless tapestry of thought.

One day, amidst a whirlwind of discussion, he theatrically approached a student perched in the back row. "Tell me," he inquired, with a sly grin, "if faced with the choice between honor and wealth, which of these elusive treasures would you covet?" Laughter spilled from his lips as he reveled in the response, "Ah, another soul seduced by the sirens of honor! But what, pray tell, will you do with this intangible, ephemeral honor? For it is wealth, dear friend, that paints honor's brilliant hues and cloaks our human imperfections in a gilded veil." The student, exposed and vulnerable, grappled with this new conundrum, feeling as if he were teetering on the edge of a precipice between conviction and doubt.

In the ever-shifting dance of perspectives, the discourse on the relativity of values weaves its intricate tapestry. As we journey through the chiaroscuro of ideals, we uncover the vast and variegated landscape that spans the distance between black and white – an amalgamation of idealism and pragmatism that invites us to approach with wholehearted devotion and utmost sincerity, guided by the lantern of our intellect and understanding.
In this world where values are fluid, not fixed, our strategic choices are tethered to the ebb and flow of time, the constraints of space, and the serendipity of circumstance – a dance we call personal judgment. Let us not lose sight of this truth, for without it, we may find ourselves adrift, mere automatons beholden to the dogma of preconceived notions.

One day, as I meandered from the library, I chanced upon my esteemed mentor. With a respectful greeting, he inquired, "What quest consumes you now?" I responded, "I find myself delving into the essence of values in these moments." A knowing smile graced his lips as he said, "Ah, my friend, you seem a man of action."
He paused, then posed a question, "Do you grasp the delicate distinction between being a man of action and becoming ensnared by action itself?" He continued, "Countless talents have withered, lost in the maelstrom of action – some ascending to governorships, others ensconced in ministerial positions, a few dispatched as ambassadors, and many more shackled to the inexorable rhythm of nine-to-five."
In this ceaseless whirlwind of action, the wellspring of transcendent thoughts and the dreams of forging new worlds are obscured from our sight, leaving us to wonder what might have been.

This serendipitous meeting with Surati Sahib unlocked the doors to his illustrious gatherings, and I found myself drawn to their magnetic pull whenever the chance presented itself. Upon my arrival, his countenance would brighten, and Siddiq Mian would materialize with a tray bearing the elixir of tea. Their artistry lay in the precise brewing of Green Label tea, steeped for the perfect duration, and cups warmed to an exacting temperature. The tea, offered with unwavering

dedication, held such allure that one's desire for tea elsewhere would vanish.

In Surati Sahib's salon, an eclectic tapestry of personalities wove together – pipe-smoking sages to turbaned erudites, each cherishing their attendance as an esteemed privilege. The heart of the gatherings' charm lay in the fact that distinguished scholars and revered mentors regarded us, the pupils, as equal contributors to the symphony of thoughts exchanged.

One day, as I sauntered into the gathering, I found Professor Khurshid al-Islam already immersed in a cloud of his own thoughts, accentuated by the rhythmic puffs from his pipe. Our conversation weaved around Abul Ala Maududi's 1940 lecture at Aligarh Muslim University's Strachey Hall, an event that molded the foundations of Islamic Society for History and Civilization. The lecture, later adorned with the title "How an Islamic State is Established," was a topic of contention between us.

Professor Khurshid, his eyes flickering with the memories of perhaps being an attendee of that gathering, questioned Maududi's comprehension of Marxism. "Did he really delve into the depths of Marxism? All I see is a cursory dismissal without any rigorous, specialized or focused academic critique," he said, half-lost in a wistful gaze directed towards the window, while artfully crafting smoke rings.

I marveled at the ease with which this Urdu professor dismissed Maududi, an influential force in 20th-century Muslim thought, likening him to the ephemeral nature of those delicate smoke rings. Curiosity gnawed at me, urging me to ask him about his firsthand experience of the gathering at Strachey Hall. But I hesitated, held back by the invisible threads of respect.

It was my maiden encounter with such a pipe-smoking professor, and when he modestly proclaimed himself a minor Marxist, I understood the fervor of his devotion to Marx. It became clear that such devotion, whether directed towards a spiritual guide or a revered scholar, often clouds an individual's ability to analyze and evaluate with unadulterated objectivity.

One day, amid the labyrinth of intellectual musings, I found myself enveloped in a discourse on the perplexing concepts of good and evil, captained by Iqbal Ansari sahib, our esteemed English professor and Shakespearean aficionado, and Surti sahib. As the conversation ebbed and flowed, it meandered through the enigmatic origins of evil, its dance with the human condition, and the weighty responsibility that rests on our mortal shoulders.

Iqbal sahib's thoughts tangled like vines, his sentences never quite finding resolution. With each incomplete thought, he would leap to the next, leaving no room for his conversational partner to interject. He would intercede with, "No, no, you don't understand," before continuing his relentless torrent of ruminations. Serendipitously, similar questions about good and evil had arisen while exploring the works of Shakespeare. I had, with a student's inquisitiveness, brought these very inquiries to our professor's attention during class. The conversation veered, yet instead of yielding to ire, he found solace in silence.

A few days hence, I received an invitation to an academic gathering where the central theme was the enigma of the unbeliever. To my astonishment, the professor had appointed me, a humble student, to contribute my voice to this symposium. Embracing a student with their unique essence, according respect to their individual ruminations, and bestowing upon them the privilege of forming an opinion, in spite of their limited knowledge and experience – perhaps these are the hallmarks of a true university or academy. It was a stroke of fortune for students like us to have access to this inner sanctum, this 'university within a university,' shepherded by the venerable Sheikh of Aligarh, Ahmed Surti sahib.

One day, Surati Sahib found himself in a state of melancholy, nestled within the confines of his room. It was unusual to see him so devoid of his usual sparkle. He uttered, "My friend, are you not aware that Eric Fromm has left this world?" I inquired as to who this person was. With a sense of amazement, he replied, "You are not acquainted with Eric Fromm? His work is of immense significance." As he spoke, he

retrieved a book from his shelf and handed it to me, insisting that it was essential reading.

Intrigued, I pondered over what could have caused Surati Sahib such distress regarding this individual's passing. The first chapter discussed the concept of disobedience. The author conveyed that without disobedience, the human story would remain colorless and monotonous.

> Whose crimson blood, I wonder,
> Has colored Adam's tale asunder?[xix]

Yet, the topic of Iblis's disobedience was merely the beginning; disobedience, in itself, held positive attributes. Those who had opposed the oppressive systems in the world, who denied the tyrannical forces and were considered to possess revolutionary qualities, which sustained human civilization's vitality, were fundamentally disobedient to the norms of their era. Thus, disbelief in tyranny emerged. As I leafed through the pages, my eyes became transfixed on a particular sentence.

"It is a cruel necessity for our economy to thrive that our people must suffer in sickness."

What the author aimed to convey was that beneath the shiny surface of economic growth, particularly in capitalist societies where wealth accumulates and the quality of life seemingly improves, lies a grim reality. This growth is constructed upon the deprivation and hardships faced by countless individuals who are instrumental in creating the wealth but are cruelly excluded from reaping its rewards. The inherent contradictions of modern capitalist society cast a dark shadow over its future prospects.

The author contends that 1958 in the United States might be seen as one of the most prosperous eras in human history, a time when such affluence was previously unimaginable. Yet, the very emergence of this prosperity serves as an ominous harbinger, signaling that the maintenance and progress of such a world order necessitates the sacrifice of a vast number of people, forced to endure deprivation as they help build the wealth they will never share.

In this profound work, I found myself reflecting on the notion that each person is born into a particular group or tribe, yet we should strive to break free from its constraints and work towards discovering our true, autonomous selves. This journey of self-realization, of becoming 'fully born', can be an arduous one. Many people traverse life without ever fully emerging, constrained by the familiar comforts of their origins.

The concept of incest, defined here as seeking the protective cocoon in the presence of one's mother, was equally captivating. As the author suggests, granting oneself complete autonomy can be a Herculean task. There is an undeniable allure in identifying with the mother, family, tribe, ideological group, or nation that we consider ourselves to be a part of. However, if we remain entrenched within these groups, how can we ever claim to be truly born as unique, individual beings?

These and other introspective musings, articulated in various manners, stirred something within me. The author's bold critique of Freud's widely accepted theories demonstrated that even the most towering intellectual pillars can be shaken and toppled. This work invites us to step outside our comfort zones, to question established norms, and to embark on the journey of self-discovery that is the essence of our human experience.

On the second day, as I handed the book back to Surati sahib, I couldn't help but wonder why the author was so fervent about the concept of being fully born. It seemed as though, without breaking free from preconceived intellectual confines, one's very existence in this world would be questionable. Yet, intriguingly, the author never tires of claiming his identity as a socialist democrat. Surati sahib, noticing my objection, offered a knowing smile and said, "Your point is valid, but don't leap to conclusions with haste. Doubt is merely the first stage; as you learn to question your own skepticism, you'll find yourself inching closer to certainty."

At the General Education Center, where Surati sahib's office resided, a vibrant mosaic of extracurricular activities buzzed with life. From one corner, the melodious strains of music students perfecting their craft emanated, while theater devotees rehearsed their latest production elsewhere. The film club connoisseurs could be seen diligently devising their upcoming documentary screening. As the Writers' Forum secretary, I found myself immersed in organizing eclectic events, covering literature, culture, philosophy, and politics.

Every few weeks, as the sun dipped into the horizon, we'd gather. Beneath the welcoming embrace of trees on lush lawns, rows of chairs patiently awaited. Professors reclined on plush cushions, indulging in intellectual conversations. Tea and snacks were carefully arranged, catering to our diverse tastes. Some evenings were dedicated to weaving a tapestry of poetry and literature, while others delved into the realms of academic exploration and discourse.

Once upon a time, a captivating group of spiritualists journeyed from Sweden, bringing with them a mystical promise. They professed the power to illuminate the hidden realms of our hearts through the art of spiritual focus. If the seekers could muster genuine intention and desire, our ethereal souls might soon dance with our corporeal forms, suspended in space like gossamer strands of cotton.
They shared enchanting, vivid booklets, illustrating the wonder of humans suspended mid-air, seemingly on the cusp of soaring. The concept intrigued us. Professors and students alike eagerly embraced the chance to embark on this spiritual adventure.

And so, a novel exercise commenced. With eyes shut tight, the seekers strived to shield themselves from the relentless invasion of thoughts. In this initial phase, the aim was to purge the heart and mind of every whisper and reverie, thus preparing for the entry of higher, more sublime reflections. Mornings and evenings were devoted to these gatherings of enlightenment, fervor ever-present.

Yet, fate is fickle, and unexpectedly, the spiritualists vanished. Our yearning to glide through the heavens remained anchored within our hearts, a wistful reminder of what might have been.

19
The Muslims or Musselman

In the scholarly life, abundant with inexpressible joys and delights, it's lamentable that on the very day of Eid, they succumbed to the same age-old tragedy that has beleaguered Indian Muslims in a divided India from its inception. Reports of reckless and brutal police gunfire at the Eid gathering in Moradabad emerged. Hundreds of people fell victim to the barrage of police bullets, while countless more perished in the ensuing stampede, among whom were many innocent children. In secular India, this sinister "gift" for Muslims on Eid was bestowed during the reign of Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi and the leadership of Chief Minister Veer Bahadur Singh. The day after the tragic incident, newspapers showcased a range of photographs, and amongst them, a pile of shoes caught my eye. Shoes that belonged to souls who had departed this world. The photographer must have chosen this image, believing that these shoes whispered silent tales to anyone who would listen. From these shoes emanated countless stories of pain and heartache, but they couldn't truly capture the final gasps of the dying souls, struggling in their last moments.

The sight of small, child-sized shoes tore at my heartstrings, stirring my imagination to picture the innocent dreams they had woven—dreams of buying trinkets or treats with their Eid money upon returning from the Eidgah. The loving hands of mothers, who had adorned their children with utmost affection for the celebration, were etched in my mind. Where are these innocent souls now?

The pile of shoes is merely a poignant reminder of the passing of a caravan of death. It doesn't grant us access to the true anguish and cries hidden behind this tragedy. The image, so deeply ingrained in my consciousness, seemed to impart the notion that these shoes, once belonging to worshippers, had begun to converse with each other—a dialogue etched in loss and grief. Years later, when I found myself wandering through the Holocaust Museum, the sight of carefully

arranged piles of shoes and heaps of human hair etched itself into my memory. I came to understand that while artifacts and mementos might not capture the entirety of the story, they hold the power to evoke an emotional response. A shiver ran down my spine, a fleeting yet poignant sensation, like a wave of desolation sweeping through my very being from head to toe. And yet, in that moment, I couldn't quite unravel the full significance of the image of the worshippers' shoes. The whispers of their untold stories remained elusive, leaving me with a deep sense of longing to understand.

As days turned into weeks, the horrifying details of the massacre trickled in, like drops of blood staining the fabric of humanity. The national press and the government machinery, accomplices in concealing the truth, wove a web of lies and deceit around the murder of innocent Muslims. They first painted a picture of Hindu-Muslim riots, only to then slyly shift the blame entirely onto the Muslims, pinning the violence on their alleged provocation.
In their twisted version of the truth, they claimed that Muslims had attacked the police, compelling the officers to open fire in defense. Officially, the death toll stood at a mere two to three hundred lives, a sickening understatement compared to the two to three thousand lives reported by independent sources.

M.J. Akbar, a bright and passionate young journalist of the time, penned a chilling report from Moradabad. He revealed that the PAC (Provincial Armed Constabulary) had callously opened fire on a congregation of forty thousand Muslims who had come together for Eid prayers. Though the exact number of casualties remains shrouded in mystery, one thing is painfully clear: what transpired in Moradabad was not a Hindu-Muslim riot, but a government-sanctioned massacre, with its ghastly truth concealed beneath the guise of civil unrest.

The Times of India, in a shameful act of misdirection, attributed the responsibility for the massacre to the sectarian attitudes of Muslims, even going so far as to suggest that funds from Gulf countries played a role. The Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), once considered

credible among impartial circles, too, pointed fingers at "sectarian Muslim leaders" and organizations like the Muslim League.
The agonizing reality of the Eidgah – the merciless onslaught against innocent Muslims, the blood-soaked aftermath, and the gruesome desecration of the dead by the notorious PAC – remained buried beneath the choking silence of the media. The unspeakable truth of the massacre, a story drenched in blood and tears, lay forgotten in the dark corners of the press, where it gasped for air, yearning to be told.

In our midst was a classmate by the name of Haleem Ahmad Siddiqui, a man whose years had bestowed upon him a wisdom beyond our collective experiences. In 1973, Haleem arrived in Aligarh with aspirations of completing his BA, but life had other plans, and he was unable to carry on his educational pursuits. Undeterred, seven years later, he summoned the courage to return to academia despite his impoverished circumstances.

Haleem's speech possessed an unmistakable edge, each word he spoke weaving a captivating tapestry of enchantment. With a seemingly endless repertoire of stories and jokes, he could delight any audience with his singular brand of humor. At times, his eloquence would leave the listeners humbled, mouths agape in admiration.

One day, Haleem met Qurratulain Hyder, a visiting professor at the university. He once remarked on her countenance, musing that even the most ravaged ruins hint at the grandeur that once stood. A man of many talents, Haleem dabbled in short story writing and poetry, and never hesitated to share his creations with anyone who would listen. But it was his engaging conversation that captivated people far more than his written works.
Following a brief respite for the Eid holidays, Haleem's absence left a void in our class. Eventually, he reappeared, but the man we once knew seemed replaced by a hollow shell, the spark that once burned brightly now extinguished. Concerned, we surrounded him, seeking to understand the cause of his torment.
Tears streamed down his face as he spoke of his brother's tragic end. He questioned the sense in his own survival, lamenting the weight of

responsibility that now lay solely upon his shoulders. He spoke of a home in ruins, of false cases, and a life lived in fear. As Haleem wept, we offered our consolation, trying to lift his spirits, but we knew our attempts were merely drops in an ocean of sorrow.
In that moment, we understood the haunting truth: to be a Muslim in this country meant a life lived in the shadow of perpetual dread, a merciless existence, only ended by the oppressor's bullet that would grant the ultimate reprieve.

Days later, as the fog in Haleem Bhai's mind lifted, a coherent conversation bloomed like a flower after a storm. "Though my roots lie in Amroha, fate brought us to our maternal grandparents' home during Eid. My brother, oh, my dear brother, breathed his last before my very eyes. The bullet mercilessly tore through his chest, and I can still see, etched in my memory, the paralyzing fear that once held his eyes captive. The cruel hands of the oppressors denied him even a chance at medical aid. Now, I can't help but wonder if he might have clung to life, and this uncertainty may haunt me for all my remaining days."

In moments of vulnerability, Haleem Bhai would only recount fragments of the Eidgah tragedy, as if language itself was inadequate to convey his pain. One day, feeling somewhat stronger, he opened up and shared how he managed to escape the bloodbath. Reflecting on his ordeal, he was unsure whether to attribute his survival to courage or cowardice.
"In the aftermath of the police firing, utter chaos ensued, leaving everyone's whereabouts unknown," he said. "I was aware of my brother's death, but my maternal grandfather and uncle were missing. For days, I searched graveyards, hospitals, and the bodies piled onto police trucks, seeking my loved ones. Hope dwindled with each passing day, but then, after almost a week, my uncle secretly returned home."
Haleem Bhai recalled their late-night arrival, the terror they felt as they hesitated to open the door. Relief washed over him when his uncle appeared, as if returning from the grave. Intrigued by their mysterious entrance, he questioned their journey home. They

admitted that when faced with life-threatening circumstances, humans are capable of almost anything.
The uncle recounted how they had initially resisted the police but were forced into hiding when their pursuers began hunting them like animals. For three agonizing days, they sought refuge in a dilapidated grave, starving and parched. Eventually, the danger lessened, and they moved to the safety of a relative's home. The fact that it took them an entire week to return home from the Eidgah was a sobering testament to the brutality they had faced.

And what of your maternal grandfather? I inquired. His voice trembled as he spoke: Grandfather was seized from home, his health in a perilous state. It's said that when one of the prisoners emerged from the police van, the merciless officers set upon them with their batons. Grandfather suffered a blow to the head, a crimson cascade pouring from the wound, staining his snowy beard. Yet, the police showed no compassion. When someone kicked him, he fell and never rose again, alive. As he recounted this, tears welled up in Haleem Bhai's eyes once more.
He continued: Imagine, if you will, that our maternal uncle still lives, but all that made life worth living has been stripped away. A living corpse, you might say. Taking refuge in the graveyard seems to have sapped their very essence. Bearing witness to their powerlessness, one can't help but think grandfather's death a kinder fate. At least he rests in his grave, afforded the dignity of the deceased. The true tragedy lies with us, the living, forced to endure an existence akin to that of the dead. With these words, Haleem Bhai fell silent once more. Though he might have had more to say, I deemed it prudent to let the matter rest, fearing his composure might crumble.

Within the General Education Center, Surti Sahib had established a Great Book Club, which held intermittent discussions on significant and internationally celebrated works of literature. The club's secretary, Abdul Majeed Shamsi, was a resident in our hostel. Although pursuing engineering, Shamsi harbored a keen passion for literature and philosophy. He occasionally crafted verses and ardently collected rare

books. To fulfill this pursuit, he frequented Delhi's Sunday Bazaar every few weeks. His room overflowed with books—mostly old, yet in pristine condition.

One day, I spotted two books by Primo Levi among his collection. The first, titled 'The Periodic Table,' I initially mistook for a chemistry textbook. The second, named 'If This Is a Man,' appeared to be an autobiographical narrative. As it turned out, the author was of Jewish heritage, and the story chronicled the ten months he endured in a Nazi German prison. This marked my first encounter with an autobiographical work penned by a Jewish author. Intrigued, I delved into it, and as I journeyed deeper, I was struck by an uncanny sense of familiarity.

I devoured half the book hastily, even as each page enticed me to pause and reflect. Simultaneously, I yearned to discover the fate of those imprisoned and subjected to such inhumanity by their fellow humans. Eventually, I arrived at the chapter titled 'The Drowned and the Saved,' which detailed the lives of those who perished and those who survived. To my horror, I discovered that the lowest-ranking prisoners in these German camps—those devoid of life's spark—were derogatorily referred to as 'Musselman (Muslims).' A 'Musselman' prisoner was one whose health persistently deteriorated, whose utility in terms of forced labor or physical work had ceased, and whose inevitable fate was the gas chamber. No one deemed such a prisoner worthy of friendship or aid; even uttering their name was considered a burden. A person rendered entirely useless no longer merited empathy from their fellow inmates, as this was the law of the prison:
‘To him who has, more will be given; from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.’

In a prison where everyone warranted sympathy, extending empathy to a 'Musselman' (Muslim) was deemed superfluous, as even the smallest gesture of compassion carried a cost. Why squander it on someone without a future, for whom the gas chamber doors loomed mere moments away? If prisoners held any significance, it was due to

their utility. Doctors, tailors, cobblers, singers, cooks, or even attractive young men succeeded in forging connections with the German officers of the prison. These individuals were considered useful. Meanwhile, ordinary prisoners who aided the Nazi officers in managing and disciplining the prison population learned to control their fellow inmates. These people were commonly referred to as 'Kapos.'

With few German officers present, the prison's entire management and discipline were essentially overseen by these Kapos, who understood the psychology of their peers and mastered the art of control. Jewish Kapos often exhibited cruelty surpassing that of the Nazi Germans, fearing that any leniency in management and discipline would result in the loss of their privileges and benefits. To maintain their positions, these Kapos inflicted all manner of oppression on their fellow inmates. They had no other choice. They either became Kapos and transgressed moral boundaries or transformed into ordinary, powerless prisoners en route to becoming 'Musselman' (Muslim).
Levi marveled at how the demise of individuals drained of life, unconscious of their suffering, and deaf to their own sighs and cries could be termed 'death.' How could death visit someone already lifeless? This image of sorrow and despair was dubbed 'Musselman,' signifying a person stripped of dignity, honor, and fervor, from whom the respect of humanity had been withdrawn. In Auschwitz prison, this shambling husk was called 'Musselman' (Muslim).

Upon learning the definition of 'Musselman' (Muslim) from a Jewish scholar, I was taken aback. Auschwitz served as an experimental camp where wandering Jews were subjected to escalating torture until they eventually transformed into 'Musselman' over time. To metamorphose millions of Jews into 'Musselman,' stripping them of their honor and courage and converting them into walking corpses, Hitler had to construct large-scale concentration camps. The world cried out in horror at the human suffering inflicted by the Nazis; Allied bombers sprang into action. Meanwhile, in a divided India, where Muslims have faced systematic, bloody persecution from the government for

roughly thirty years, two hundred million Indian Muslims are now treading the path towards becoming 'Musselman' akin to those in Auschwitz. This new definition of 'Musselman,' born from the concentration camp, refers to a person robbed of their human qualities. Reading these lines, I was reminded of Halim Bhai's uncle, living out his days in a lifeless state after having been buried for a short while, as though his true existence had already concluded and only a hollow, half-dead semblance remained. I couldn't shake the image of Halim Bhai's tearful eyes. The massacre in Moradabad was not an isolated incident in this country. I began to question my own intellectual integrity, realizing that I, too, was a character in this experimental camp. Oh, God! Save me from becoming a 'Musselman.'

20
Maulvi Kapo: A Figure to Reckon With

As I dived into Levi's words, I couldn't help but feel the weight of the twisted reality that the Jews faced in Nazi concentration camps. It wasn't just their enemies they had to worry about, but their own people as well. The German officers were few, which made me wonder how they managed to control thousands of prisoners. Well, the answer was as sickening as it was ingenious: they appointed some prisoners as "Kapos" to do their dirty work.

These Kapos were given authority to form a group from among the prisoners and enforce the camp's rules and regulations. They were the "commandos" – standing at the center of a chaotic web, holding onto threads that stretched between SS officers and the poor souls trapped in the camps.

But these Kapos weren't just enforcers; they held the power of life and death in their hands. And while they were prisoners themselves and belonged to the Jews, they embraced their administrative tasks with a twisted loyalty, and cozied up to the Nazis. It was like they were selling their souls for a few extra scraps.

In exchange for their "loyalty," Kapos were granted certain privileges. They didn't have to do forced labor, they got more rations, separate rooms, and even cigarettes and bottles of alcohol on special occasions. It was like they had struck some sort of twisted deal with the devil, and all they had to do was maintain normalcy in the camp.

But within this murky world of Kapos, there were some who tried to help their fellow Jews, showing that even in the darkest of places, there's a tiny glimmer of hope. However, they all agreed on one thing: the status quo should remain, and no voice for change should rise above the din.

As I read Levi's account, it struck me how human beings can be pushed to such extremes when faced with unimaginable circumstances. The Kapos, stuck in a hellish limbo between oppressor and oppressed, were a haunting reminder of how easily lines can blur when survival is at stake.

Levi captured the essence of camp life, painting a portrait of the human condition at its most desperate, where hope's faint glimmers are swallowed by darkness. Within this bleak existence, there arises a twisted sense of loyalty that binds one to the very forces that destroy them. In a world where survival demands the sacrifice of others, the lines between hero and villain blur, leaving only the raw, unfiltered desire to stay alive.

In this cruel dance of life and death, unity crumbles under the weight of suffering, and the camp becomes a battleground where only the ruthless can endure. With each breath stolen from another's lips, the struggle to survive is both a triumph and a tragedy.

Here, the Sonderkommandos - the very ones who had once shared their victims' faith - now hold the power to determine who will live and who will die. Depravity seeps into their souls, as they tear gold teeth from the lifeless jaws of their brethren, and feed the fires that consume their past.

In this grim theater of betrayal and despair, the Kapos are the puppet masters, the orchestrators of a sadistic symphony played out within the walls of the camp. And as the anguished cries of millions rise to the heavens, the world is left to wonder how such darkness could ever be born from the heart of humanity.

I had come across a passage in the writings of Abul Kalam Azad, a powerful phrase that struck a chord within me. He addressed Muslims with fervor, stating, "Remember, no one can subdue us but ourselves." As I contemplated the actions of the Kapos in the context of the Indian Muslim community's predicament, I was struck by a jarring realization. The deep, unsettling truth emerged, leaving me to question if the secular masquerade of divided India is upheld by these very same "Kapos"?

In the midst of chaos and adversity, from the riots in Ahmedabad in 1969 to the massacre in Moradabad in 1980, no influential voice rose to quell the whirlpool of destruction that engulfed the Muslim community. Those who navigated the delicate relationship between the ruling Congress party and the Muslim masses merely desired to

maintain the status quo, with no change or upheaval in sight. Be they Congress-affiliated clerics or Muslim politicians, they lacked the courage to speak against the establishment even in the most trying times.

These turbaned and robed scholars, who seemingly overflowed with the words of Allah and His Messenger, would conjure up the specter of Hindu revivalism during each election season, urging Muslims to vote for the Congress party. Have these privileged scholars and political leaders, much like the Jewish Kapos, traded the well-being of their people for the temporary satisfaction of a few cigarette puffs or bottles of liquor?

Azad's words have become a painful revelation for me. Oh, how reality diverges from what meets the eye! I cried out, "Allahumm Arini Al-Ashya'a Kama Hiya – O Allah, show me things as they truly are." My heart ached, pleading for a glimpse of the genuine state of affairs.

Halim Bhai had been missing from class for days on end, and a gnawing anxiety took hold of me. I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to check in on him, see how he was faring. So, as the shadows of evening stretched out, we made our way to his room, only to find him lying in bed, a sight that twisted my insides with worry. "Are you okay?" I asked, my voice thick with concern.

Seeing us, Halim Bhai tried to sit up, but the weight of his weakness held him down. Propping himself up halfway against the bed, he spoke, his voice tinged with despair. "A few days ago, fever took hold of me. The fever's gone now, but I can't bring myself to do anything. Everything feels so utterly meaningless. Moradabad's situation clings to its tense state, and not a single day goes by without the stain of violence marking it. Those who've lost their homes, whose families have been torn apart, are now ensnared in a web of false accusations. It's as if no one is looking out for our community. Whenever I close my eyes, the haunting scene of the Eidgah dances behind my eyelids."

Watching him, so lost in thought and weighed down by sorrow, I tried to offer some solace. "Why not write about this issue? Your talent for storytelling is undeniable. Share this pain, make it known to others."

But Halim Bhai's response was heavy with resignation. "I used to believe I could spin a good yarn, but now I've become a story in and of itself. If only the divine could pen a happy ending to our tale."

As we delved deeper into the Moradabad catastrophe, it became painfully clear that the Muslim leadership was falling short of taking any sort of decisive action in response to the heinous massacre. I tried to jog Halim Bhai's memory, reminding him of a recent meeting they had convened.

"I was there," he admitted, his voice heavy with disappointment. "The gathering at the 'Bachchon ka Ghar' on September 11th – I was there, and so were some other students from Aligarh. It was baffling, really. With the weight of such an enormous tragedy upon us, the Majlis Mushawarat (Consultative Council) couldn't come up with any practical program. It felt like they had just gone through some ritual, as if the meeting was just an eyewash, an exercise in self-deception or psychological satisfaction."

"And what came out of the meeting?" I asked, trying to draw out more from him.

"Nothing," he sighed, the frustration palpable in his voice. "They passed the usual resolution, expressing their 'deep concern.' We couldn't stand it. We insisted that if they weren't going to do anything else, they should at least send a delegation from the Mushawarat to Moradabad immediately. When we saw their reluctance, we couldn't hold back our protests any longer."

His voice grew more animated as he recounted the mounting tension. "The atmosphere in the meeting became charged with anger and frustration. The students, ourselves included, began to chant slogans. We demanded that they either go to Moradabad the next day or retreat to their graves; we had no need for leadership that was so ineffectual and merely satisfied with going through the motions, devoid of genuine empathy."

"Who were the attendees at the gathering? My curiosity was piqued. They were the very people we unfortunately regarded as our allies and comforters in times of distress. The leaders of various Muslim groups, distinguished scholars, and national figureheads were all present, yet

they seemed to hesitate when it came to taking action. It was as if someone had silenced their tongues, allowing only expressions of concern to escape their lips.
And did they devise a plan to visit Moradabad, you wonder? The story unfolded like this: These distinguished individuals eventually made their way to Moradabad, but not before paying a visit to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It seemed as though they sought her approval for this expedition, and under her guidance, they arrived in Moradabad. The Commissioner of Moradabad arranged their accommodations at a guest house, facilitated meetings with locals, and encouraged a few hours of conversation. But soon, apprehension got the better of these prominent individuals, and they hastily left the city, fearing that their continued presence might only invite further risks."

"When they ventured forth at the Prime Minister's nod and the Commissioner of Moradabad had officially arranged their lodgings, what could they possibly have been afraid of?" I inquired. He replied: "It's baffling why they were so eager to flee Moradabad. They should have seized the moment, delved into the Muslim neighborhoods, lent an ear to their heartaches, and mapped out a strategy for freeing those who remained behind bars. They could have rallied lawyers to extricate the accused from fabricated cases and pursued justice for those innocent souls caught in the crossfire of police bullets. And, by documenting the testimonies of eyewitnesses, they might have exposed the harsh reality of the situation. Among the delegation were writers and authors; one wonders why they didn't have the foresight to compile a comprehensive report on this tragic event in hopes of averting such a catastrophe in the future."
"Many esteemed figures within the Muslim community were part of this delegation," I noted, "and it's difficult to believe that they would have neglected their duty."

Hearing this, Haleem couldn't help but feel stirred once more. "It's truly remarkable how this unquestioning, reverential mindset has led us astray," he mused. "We mustn't gauge people by their honorifics, manners, or garb; rather, we should assess whether their actions serve

the greater good of the community or bring about harm. In my eyes, it appears that each disaster befalling the Ummah bestows upon our leaders yet another opportunity to rendezvous with the Prime Minister. It's a well-worn routine: convene a meeting, draft a memorandum, issue statements of concern to the press, stage a photo-opportunity, and then retreat to the sanctuary of their homes."
Eyes ablaze, Haleem bolted upright, proclaiming, "I daresay, these individuals might even lie in wait, anticipating chaos, all in the hopes of securing an audience with the Prime Minister."

As I took my leave from Haleem Bhai, I sensed that something had shifted within him. His unspoken pain had found its way out, and in revealing his sorrow, he seemed to experience a sense of relief. With each step away, my mind wandered, considering the possibility that he was right.

Instead of abandoning the Muslims of Muradabad in the wake of an unspeakable massacre, we could have at least produced a white paper, initiated legal action against those responsible, and demanded some semblance of justice. This might have demonstrated that someone, anyone, cared about this Ummah.

But that was merely a fragment of the bigger picture. Our scholars and leaders, the ones with an aura of sanctity enveloping them, the ones whose call to action mobilizes the masses to protect the Shariah, the ones who gather thousands for the 85-year celebration of Nadwa, and the ones who assemble millions for the centenary celebrations of Deoband – what if they were to genuinely seek reform? The potential was staggering. And yet, they seemed to find solace in the Prime Minister's platitudes, never quite taking tangible action. Why not challenge the status quo? Why cling to the chaos, the meetings, the rendezvous with the Prime Minister?

A whisper seeped into my heart, planting the notion that their esteem hinged upon these liaisons with the Prime Minister. She needed them, needed leaders who would seek solace solely in her, leaders who would

never entertain the thought of rebellion against her party. For a fleeting moment, I questioned whether our venerated scholars and leaders in this fractured India were unwittingly dancing like puppets on a stage. But I quickly dismissed the thought, convincing myself that such insinuations about holy and spiritual individuals must be nothing more than the whisperings of Satan.

21
Constitutional Safeguards

As the new academic year dawned, the atmosphere remained heavy, clouded by the aftershocks of the Muradabad massacre. A pervasive sense of despair gripped the students, who couldn't shake the feeling that the Ummah had been abandoned by a higher power. The political and religious leaders' acceptance of the tragedy as the new normal only fueled our disillusionment, with many realizing that the same factors that ignited the massacre still lurked in the shadows, threatening to strike again.

Amidst the chaos, Surati Sahab extended an invitation to Javed Habib to discuss the pressing Muslim issue. Javed Habib was a favored student of Surati Sahab's, a young man who had made a name for himself as a staunch advocate for minority character of the university. His talents extended far beyond the campus walls, as he also held an influential position within the Muslim Youth Convention and acted as the editor of the weekly newspaper "Hujoom" from Delhi. Surati Sahab lovingly referred to him as half a Qalandar, a nod to the charismatic, Qalandar-like essence he brought to the political realm.

Javed Sahab's arrival breathed life back into Surati Sahab's long-dormant Owl Club, with the Muslim issue thrust into the spotlight. As the forum's secretary, I was tasked with introducing the topic and setting the stage for the distinguished speaker. In an effort to keep the discussion focused and constructive, some students were assigned to provide essential information and statistics on various aspects of the Muslim experience. This included an overview of political representation, cultural institutions, and economic participation – all aimed at maintaining a proper context.

Yet, when Javed Sahab took the stage, the numbers and figures were all but forgotten. His words, charged with passion and intensity, held us captive for over an hour, leaving us hanging on his every syllable.

The emotions swirled, raw and unfiltered, as we wrestled with the shadows of Muradabad and our collective yearning for a brighter future.
But even in the wake of Javed Sahab's powerful oratory, the path forward remained elusive. The questions of where Muslims should go and how to begin their political empowerment hung heavily in the air, unanswered and uncertain. The aching need for change was palpable, but how to ignite it remained just out of reach – an enigma obscured in a fog of despair and hope.

In those days, Javed Habib was diligently crafting a Dalit-Muslim political alliance under the influence of Jai Bhim-Jai Meem. On the day before his talk, I found myself ardently criticizing this style of politics, asserting that it strayed far from the Islamic agenda. Muslims, who hold the position of the best nation and are the claimants and leaders of the system in this country, cannot be led by Dalit leaders, regardless of how noble their intentions may be.

My words were so impassioned that they completely negated the conversation of the esteemed speaker. Javed listened to my outburst with a knowing smile but later shared his grievances with Surti sahib, explaining that as the host, I shouldn't have taken such a stance. He suggested that after reading the literature of political movements and the minds of political Islam, our youth can easily be influenced in this direction.

Surti sahib dismissed the issue lightheartedly, saying that if someone possesses religious zeal and passion and doesn't become influenced by Jamaat-e-Islami or become a member after reading Maulana Maududi's literature, one should doubt their faith. However, if an individual becomes entranced by Maududi's writings in their youth, joins the Jamaat, and remains there for the rest of their life, then perhaps we should lament their intellectual stagnation.
Amused, Surti sahib let out a chuckle, and the atmosphere of mutual respect and warmth returned to the gathering. Surti sahib himself had

once been an active member of the Jamaat, and now, in his words, his intellectual and academic journey continued beyond its confines.

One day, following the wrap-up of the program, we found ourselves sipping tea beneath the Molsari tree at the General Education Center. It was during this moment that Haleem Bhai appeared on the scene. Though he had attended Javed Habib's speeches, he seemed somewhat detached from it all. Upon seeing the pocket edition of the Indian Constitution in Adil's hand, Haleem Bhai was overcome with emotion, remarking, "Perhaps you'll memorize this before taking your last breath. Brother, one should at least acquaint themselves with the constitution in order to understand the protections it offers as a citizen of this country. Many among us don't even recognize our own constitutional rights." Adil attempted to placate him.

Adil harbored an additional fascination for politics, and this perhaps fueled his interest in the constitution to such a degree that he always carried a pocket edition with him. He would often voice his astonishment at how the constitution granted such firm guarantees to Muslims both as citizens and specifically as minority citizens, and yet the plight of Muslims in this country remained so precarious. In this context, Adil and Abbas often engaged in spirited, lighthearted exchanges.

After the Muradabad incident, Haleem Bhai remained introspective for a few days, and then he seemed to transform into a personification of protest. His moods became unpredictable, as enigmatic as the weather. For a while, he detached himself from the gathering, finding solace in his tea, before pulling his chair to the center of the conversation. With a surge of emotion, he exclaimed, "Brother, nothing fruitful will emerge from these conversations. Those who speak of igniting the flames of love after Muradabad are blind to the true depth of our suffering. They can't fathom the extent of our anguish and the way our internal wounds persistently bleed. Those who aim to conceal our pain with superficial platitudes under the guise of humanity are actually the criminals in this story. They cannot

possibly have our well-being at heart. If only they had walked a mile in our shoes, they would grasp the agony we've endured and how unbearable it is for wounded souls to have their pain trivialized and swept aside by the force of others' rhetoric."
Halim, you're right, but we must push forward! New strategies need to be uncovered; after all, how long can we continue to dwell on the tragedy of Moradabad?
Mourning? Very well! Uttering these words, Halim shifted his chair, turning his back to the gathering as though staging a walkout in protest.
You see, my friend, my thought-out belief is that we haven't fully harnessed the constitutional and legal avenues yet. Muslims in this country must ready themselves for a legal and constitutional fight.
"What constitution are you talking about? To me, it seems that its allure resides solely on the elegantly composed pages. In the reality of life, it strengthens the powerful instead of the vulnerable. In fact, I'd argue that it houses certain provisions that solidify Hindu majority rule," Abbas interjected.
How could that be? Adil objected.
Abbas responded, "There are numerous aspects; allow me to present a few examples." Flipping through the opening pages of the constitution, he continued, "Look at what the first provision of the constitution articulates:

India, that is Bharat, shall be a union of states.

Ah, India, that enchanting and mythical land known as Hindustan, where high caste Hindus once reveled in their dominance and superiority. You see, it's said that as the Constituent Assembly sketched the blueprint of this new nation, Hindu leaders longed to revive the legend of Bharat. Some spiritual ascetics even vowed to fast until death for their cause, and a woman of faith threatened to starve unless the country was named Bharat and Hindi declared the national language. Nehru and his fellow Congress leaders eventually caved to these demands. The very mention of "Bharat" in the first article of the

constitution hints at a nation now governed by those deeply connected to the ancient Hindu civilization.
Adil, with an air of wonder and curiosity, said, "How fascinating! I never pondered this before."
Abbas continued, "But wait, there's more! The historical underpinnings of the first article, which proclaims India a union of states, are just as intriguing. You see, Hindustan has always been an intricate tapestry of diverse, small states. Throughout the Mughal era, kings and maharajas ruled with a measure of autonomy, and this situation lingered during the British occupation. In essence, the country should have evolved into a federation, but those who championed a centralized union believed that a strong central government would protect the nation from foreign invaders who had once found it all too easy to infiltrate India. Listening to impassioned speeches by the likes of Jagat Narain Lal and Kapoor, one can discern their fervent desire for a formidable center to shield the future of Hindustan from the ghosts of Muslim invasions past."

Incredible! Where on Earth do you unearth these captivating nuggets of information? Adil's voice rang with a mixture of wonder and astonishment. "It's not just a couple of isolated incidents, my friend. There's a treasure trove of examples like this! Think about the Hindu Code Bill, passed during the Nehru era in 1955. This legislation managed to redefine 'Hindu' to include practically everyone with the exception of Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Parsis. Meanwhile, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs kicked up a storm of protest, objecting to their forced inclusion within this category. Doesn't it strike you as somewhat odd that the constitution seems to pander to the Hindu majority, or more specifically, the Brahmin mindset, positioning it center stage in the country, while other religious factions find themselves pushed to the sidelines due to this very definition? And if, by some chance, you're still not swayed by my argument, I invite you to peruse Article 48, which concerns itself with agriculture and livestock protection. What's with this bizarre notion that the state should be charged with safeguarding cows and calves? This is nothing more than the agenda of the upper-caste Hindus, as there are

numerous Hindu groups that don't hold cows in any sort of sacred regard, especially those hailing from the southern regions, Dalits, Christians, and Muslims. These communities view this law as a thinly veiled attempt at state-sanctioned oppression. How can anyone call this secularism when, in reality, it's an insidious effort to force the spirituality of one sect upon others using the apparatus of the state?"

Certainly, you have a point, and there are indeed many positive aspects of the constitution that we cannot ignore. For instance, consider Article 14, 18, and 30, as well as the Preamble, which aspires to establish a society built on the principles of freedom, equality, liberty, and fraternity. How can we dismiss these noble ideals? Adil, with an air of impassioned eloquence, seemed to unleash a flurry of constitutional defenses like arrows from a quiver. "I don't deny the positive aspects of the constitution," he explained, "I merely aim to highlight that the document, as beautiful and idealistic as it may be, has been infiltrated by narrow-minded forces that seek to steer the course of our nation away from a modern future and towards a revival of Hindu culture. And this has not been solely the work of extremists, but also of individuals who we mistakenly consider to be secular and forward-thinking Hindus."

Adil continued, weaving an intricate tapestry of thought with his words, "Consider the contentious issue of the national language. From the initial statements of Nehru and Gandhi, many might have believed that they did not desire to see the Urdu language eradicated from the country. Gandhi even tried to resolve the national language dispute by proposing Hindustani, a language that could be written in both Devanagari and Persian scripts. But in practice, what transpired? Hindi, written in the Devanagari script, emerged as the national language, with Article 351 imposing an obligation on the state to draw primarily from Sanskrit to enrich the Hindi vocabulary."

Adil paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle in the air, before concluding, "For those who view Sanskrit as a divine language, the promotion of a Sanskrit-infused Hindi might seem like the fulfillment of a religious duty. Can we truly blame them for perceiving it in such a manner?"

In the midst of our fervent discussion, Halim Bhai, who had been sulking with his back turned to us, suddenly spun around and burst out, "Abbas! You've got a point, but let me toss in another idea for you. You see, the folks who wrote our constitution, whether they meant to or not, left the door wide open for all those beautiful promises and safeguards to remain, well, just promises. It's all there, hidden between the lines. I mean, why else haven't we been able to create a harmonious society even after thirty years? Freedom, equality, and liberty – they're still just a pipe dream. You're spot on when you say our constitutional engineers built a pretty sweet ride, but you know what? They slyly snuck in some reverse gears. Otherwise, why would we be stuck with a state that's dead set on dragging us back to ancient India, using a uniform civil code, cow protection, and Vedic Hindi as their tools? And the cherry on top? They've managed to keep up the facade of enlightened thinking, secularism, and the rule of law, all while flexing their state and legal muscle."

You know what, guys? I think you're mixing up two things here: the lofty ideas behind the constitution and the messy reality of putting it into practice. But Halim Bhai wasn't having any of it; he wasn't in the mood to listen. He shot back, "Look, the cold, hard truth is that some people in this country don't want anyone else to survive. They can't stand to see us alive, and if you all are under the impression that we are, well, that's on you. Honestly, I'd argue that not a single person of faith has made it out of this twisted maze of secularism in one piece. We're broken on the inside. After the bloodbath in Moradabad, how can life even exist? And those who think they're alive? They've seen so much death, day in and day out, that their minds are numb, their senses frozen – it's like they're not even human anymore, just zombies."

Watching Halim Bhai tumble headfirst into that dark abyss of despair and hopelessness, Adil couldn't help but try to pull him back up. He said, "C'mon, Halim Bhai, don't be so hard on yourself! The great poet of the East once said, 'There's something in us that keeps our existence from fading away.' As a nation, we've weathered some seriously tough

storms. We've got to rise above Moradabad and come out stronger. It's time for us to carve out a new path forward."

Halim Bhai, his voice trembling with emotion, spoke up, "You see, there's a chasm between the poetic ideal and the gritty reality. Our so-called secular comrades, who push us to rise above the scars of Moradabad and gaze ahead, only desire to keep us breathing, but merely at a subsistence level. They can stomach our physical presence, but our emotional and ideological identities are beyond their tolerance. And yes, we're urged to march forward from Moradabad, to employ constitutional safeguards, yet brother, it's the very same constitutional and legal ploys that stifle our progress. Now, consider this - in our nation, 48 parliamentary seats lie in Muslim-majority constituencies where Muslim candidates were sure to be elected. Yet, now even half of these seats are reserved for SCs and STs. Tell me, where should the impoverished Muslim turn? Obstacles lie in wait at every corner."
"Your point is valid," Adil tried to appease them. He said, "No one can deny the gravity of the situation. First, we must restore normal life in the country. To curb unrest, there must be understanding and dialogue between the two factions."
"Where does unrest come from, brother? Don't call it unrest; these are organized massacres carried out by rulers for their political interests."
"Then there should be dialogue with these rulers."
"But dialogue happens on an equal footing, and they consider us merely pawns in their power game."
"You're absolutely right. I tried to explain to them. I said, why not knock on the rulers' hearts, maybe some door of their hearts will open."
"He said, that's possible, but it would require at least prophetic power."
"I said, aren't we people deputies of the last prophet, the chosen people, the best nation - the "Khair Ummah," assigned to the prophetic mission?"
"Who are those people?" It seemed as if Halim Bhai was trying to understand something. Then he let out a loud laugh and said, "The best nation! You say we are the best nation, brother, no one can match you in telling jokes." Then he screamed somewhat and said, "If we

were indeed the best nation, why would this be our state? If we had a God, why would He abandon us? Let the sinners go, sir! Seven hundred children have died! Does anyone have an answer to this? Those innocent children went to prostrate before their God. What has happened to the Indian Muslims' God? Has He migrated to Pakistan as well?" Saying this, his voice trembled, and his eyes welled up. In a choked voice, he said, "What kind of God, whose worship and which prophetic mission? If I ever meet Him, I'll ask, what crime have we committed by invoking your name that you took away our life, and even deprived us of death?"

As we watched Halim Bhai being engulfed by the emotional vortex of the Moradabad tragedy, we found solace in embracing silence. When a soul reaches the depths of despair, as he had, the possibility for any further discourse simply evaporates.

22
Quarterly Tajdeed

Halim Bhai had seemingly lost all enthusiasm for writing and engaging with literary pursuits. When we planned to bring out a literary journal through our forum, he displayed not even a glimmer of interest. Surti Sahab, perhaps somewhat attuned to Halim Bhai's mental state, endeavored to sway him. He said, "My friend, the act of writing should carry on, uninterrupted. Write for yourself, write as a balm to soothe your anguish. For thinkers, writing serves as a unique form of therapy, lest they lose their equilibrium amidst the tempests of life. Take me, for example! I've discovered a form in prose poetry, and I continually compose within it. If I were to cease writing, survival would become an arduous endeavor."
Surti Sahab's words stirred memories of a childhood professor, and I recalled his incessant scribbling and writing. A thought crossed my mind: perhaps this, too, had been a strategy for survival all along.

We approached Syed Hamid Sahab, the Vice Chancellor, with our hearts full of hope and anticipation for the literary Urdu journal, *Tajdeed*, that we dreamed of sharing with the world every three months. His office, a place of knowledge and understanding, stood close to Victoria Gate, an entrance to new ideas and collaboration.
Syed Sahab, his eyes dancing with warmth, welcomed us into his abode, expressing a joy that could be felt in the very air surrounding us. His assurances of unwavering support filled our spirits with optimism.

My connection with Syed Sahab went beyond this encounter. We had shared previous meetings, and I found solace in reciting my translated verses at poetry gatherings held within the intimate walls of his residence. Now, our group, a band of kindred spirits including Adil, Shahid, Abbas, and Ali, would find ourselves drawn to Syed Sahab whenever our hearts desired or when the winds of chance brought us together. Syed Sahab himself possessed the soul of a poet, and one of

his couplets resonated deeply within the hearts of those who appreciated the beauty of language:

> Not a wound or two, the entirety of the body a sieve,
> In helpless agony, confounded, unsure whence to heave.[xx]

In all honesty, our academic and literary curiosities had captured the Vice-Chancellor Syed Sahab's heart. I perceived him as exceedingly magnanimous. He was shaped by an exquisite etiquette, the distinct hallmark of Aligarh. I was but a second-year student, while he held the esteemed position of Vice-Chancellor. When our paths crossed, he would always stand up from his seat to greet me with a handshake. On one occasion, he invited the students responsible for the club to an evening gathering due to non-academic pursuits and personally catered to our needs as our gracious host. With financial support secured from Syed Sahab, we immersed ourselves wholeheartedly in the preparations for the journal. Students were informed via billboards, and a series of meetings was organized with local writers, poets, and intellectuals from Aligarh. The first meeting took place at the residence of Akhtar Ansari. Ansari Sahab had retired from the university a short time ago. Upon hearing my pleas, he inquired, "Who told you about me? People assume I have faded into obscurity, with hardly anyone uttering my name anymore." And then, he asked if I had ever heard that certain couplet:

> In burdened past, O Lord, I'm tangled deep,
> Erase my memory, in peace let me sleep.[xxi]

Who could guess that the author of this verse still lives? For a while, he continued to bemoan his insignificance at the hands of the world. Witnessing a former Aligarh professor and a skilled poet in such a melancholic state filled me with deep sorrow. No matter how talented they may be or how much artistic excellence their stories and poems contain, they are still poets of a declining language. They have seen Urdu fleeing from their homeland, and for a poet and writer of a language that is migrating from their country, what is left for them? The Partition of India stole their language, leaving only the bitterness of life, void of happiness and pleasures. I thought about how Ansari

was once known as a passionate socialist, his name mentioned among the pioneers of Progressives Writers. But secularism and socialism, ironically, labeled him as "Muslim," reminiscent of Auschwitz' "Musselman."

As I mentioned, Qurratul Ain Haider was a visiting professor in Aligarh during those days. She could often be spotted navigating the winding corridors of the Arts Faculty, her presence both enigmatic and magnetic. One day, I took a deep breath, my heart pounding as I entered her chamber, and gathered the courage to ask her for an article for "Tajdeed."
Her response was brisk and dismissive, "Oh, brother, I don't write on request." I felt the weight of her words, like a cold splash of water, leaving me uncertain of how to proceed. Yet, I pressed on, "Then please, write something without a request."
She looked at me, her eyes piercing through my defenses, as if she wanted to comment on my daring but for some reason, she restrained herself. She finally said, "Come to my house on Sunday. I'll check my files. If there's something suitable for you, I'll give it to you."

On Sunday, I arrived at Suraiyya Apa's house, the head of the Urdu Department, where Aini Apa was staying. That day, her demeanor was warm, and she greeted me with a generous smile. She handed me an article about the poetic tradition of Muslim Andalusia, titled "Aab-e-Rawan-e-Kabir." The words on the pages felt like a treasure, an invitation into a world of history and beauty, just waiting to be explored.

> Standing on the banks of the great River Guadalquivir,
> Someone beholds a dream of a bygone era.[xxii]

Lost in time is the Muslim Andalusia, where society blossomed in a harmony of men and women, living lives of elegance and grace that today's Indian Muslims could barely fathom. A world where women stood dignified and free, and education was cherished by all. It was a place where poets, scholars, and teachers like Hassana Al-Tamimi and Umm Al-Hana held court, enlightening the minds of their contemporaries.

The Andalusian spirit once embodied the best of both worlds, with knowledge and virtue as their guiding stars. In the fading light of twilight, the songs of ghazals would fill the air, as women gathered by the windows to savor the enchanting melodies, a testament to a time when life was celebrated in all its beauty.
But now, that vibrant world has vanished, leaving only echoes of the past, a dream that lingers in the hearts of those who still remember the golden age of Muslim Andalusia.

The celestial Andalusia had vanished into the annals of history, but Aini Apa herself had gazed upon the collapse of an entire civilization in her homeland. She traversed the "River of Fire"—her famed chronicle and ventured beyond frontiers, but even there, serenity was elusive. With no choice but to return to India, Andalusia lingered as a poignant echo of a lost past.
Aini Apa bore witness to the disintegration of a vivacious culture, intertwining this melancholic experience with her creative odyssey. Having no alternative, she sought sanctuary at the feet of the venerable Deva Sharif, embracing the solace found in the spiritual guidance of a sage. In a world where her past had become a distant memory, she clung to this connection, an attempt to preserve the essence of a once-flourishing culture, tragically swept away by the merciless currents of time.

Moein Ahsan Jazbi was considered a great poet. His residence was also near the campus. After exchanging hellos, he was the next to be approached. He promptly took out his pen and, with the help of his memory, wrote a ghazal and handed it over:

"In such depths of dark I often do reside,

Is there a sun in my sky, I cannot decide?"[xxiii]

And this verse of his was etched in my memory so deeply that it still resurfaces from time to time:

"Life unravels, oh Jazbi, in this testing, endless night,

If I find God, I'll ask - Is it a torment, or a plight?"[xxiv]

It's incredible, really, how life has a way of surprising you. Take Syed Hamid Sahib, for example. He was a man of great determination, known for his bold administrative decisions and ambitious plans. I remember one time I approached him, seeking a fresh ghazal for a magazine. He obliged and, in true Hamid fashion, began his ghazal with a poignant verse:

"Why dread demise, what's in forevermore?
When the heart itself dims, what's life's lore?"[xxv]

And especially the closing verse of his ghazal:

"In the corner of these beautiful eyes, do tell,
What secrets do they hide, in that mystical spell?"[xxvi]

Then, there was Khurshid-ul-Islam, a 'humble Marxist', his exterior seemingly strong and resilient, yet his verses revealed a hidden yearning and despair:

"When heart does beat, it rings a tearful song,
In my abode, a fervor reigned strong.
Now, if the marketplace buzzes, I'm absent from the din,
Once, I was the warmth in the world's bustling inn."[xxvii]

And who could forget Shahryar, the poet who found fame with his lyrics in the film 'Umrao Jaan Ada'? He too fell victim to the crumbling culture around him:

"Every time I turn back home, I've thought,
Ah, if only I had embarked on a long voyage, sought.
I'm content, sunshine is my inherited plight,
If only my ancestors had sowed some shade, a respite."[xxviii]

It was as if the world was unraveling around us, the once-rich culture slipping through our fingers like sand. We were all grappling with our own struggles, both personal and as a nation, searching for meaning in the chaos.

As Tajdeed hit the shelves, a palpable buzz enveloped the literary circles of Aligarh, or at least it seemed so to those of us in the thick of it. Maybe it was my flair for the dramatic in my editorials, the lofty regard with which I viewed my readers that fueled this shared sense of significance. But the reality of these literary gatherings was far more

ordinary: a few professors' drawing rooms, a smattering of educational sessions across departments, and the occasional rendezvous of student writers and poets at humble venues like Shamshad Market or Café de Phos. Here, topics of conversation shifted daily, with participants forever seeking fodder for gossip.

In these gatherings, there was an unmistakable air of self-importance. Each participant felt like the wunderkind of their era, undoubtedly envisioning themselves as an international figure. So, it was only natural that we, the champions of *Tajdeed*, would share in this sentiment, convincing ourselves that through the publication of this magazine, we were penning a groundbreaking chapter in the annals of knowledge and literature.

On one of those days filled with a certain air of self-assurance, I decided it was time to pay a visit to the esteemed Professor Nazeer Ahmed. The professor was a highly respected scholar in Persian studies, and although he had long since retired from his university duties, he now sat as the president of the Ghalib Institute in Delhi. Winter's chill had settled in, but the professor was unperturbed, sipping tea in the brisk air amidst his garden's greenery. I found him in the company of Waris Kirmani Sahab, a fellow contributor whose article "This Wilderness of the Mad and the Passionate" I had recently published in Tajdeed.

The piece, an intriguing exploration of an eccentric Aligarh aristocrat, recounted how this peculiar character had once daringly recited his poem, "The Tonga of Girls' College," in a gathering brimming with literary luminaries – the likes of Jigar Sahab, Simab Sahab, and Sajjad Haider Yildirim, among others. The poem, a provocative piece, commenced with this particular verse:

> As the girls' college carriage moved along,
> With eyes and rapt attention, I pulled strong,
> Like the horse that guided the way,
> I carried the carriage through the day.[xxix]

The poem unsettled the older folks, its topic raising eyebrows, but out of reverence for the gathering, they swallowed their disapproval in

silence. When Kirmani Sahib's turn came around, a frowning elder couldn't help but inquire, "My dear boy, which aspect of the girls' college do you plan to expose in your verses?" Kirmani Sahib had jotted down that the once frivolous youth had now transformed into a pious old man, using his aged wisdom to request Kirmani Sahib not to reveal his name or the incident.

One day, I caught sight of a white-bearded elder sharing a cup of tea with Kirmani Sahib, and a whimsical thought crossed my mind. As they exchanged pleasantries and asked me where I'd been meandering, I quipped, "I'm on a quest to find the venerable sage whose intellect you hold in such high esteem, and who requested your discretion about the incident." I couldn't quite tell what he made of my remark, but since it was a gathering of esteemed scholars, embracing silence seemed like the wisest move.

During those days, the Ghalib Institute was preparing for its annual international seminar in Delhi, and quite possibly, these distinguished gentlemen were immersed in discussions related to the event. Hearing my conversations, Nazeer Sahib extended an invitation to me, urging me to partake in the Delhi program as the secretary for the Writers' Forum. Until that moment, my experiences consisted of representing the university in speech competitions across various cities. Not too long ago, I had come back from participating in one such contest at Safia College, Bhopal, with my cherished friend, Ejaz Maqbool. Our presence there was graced by the benevolence of Abdul Qawi Desnavi and other esteemed local scholars.
Nevertheless, the Delhi program presented a different kind of challenge. Instead of competing against teams of fellow students, I would be facing off against accomplished critics and scholars. The expectation wasn't for me to pen an essay, but rather to observe and listen. And so I thought, why not seize the opportunity and whimsically add the "honor" of participating in an international seminar to my growing list of experiences?

As I strolled into the Ghalib Institute on that fateful morning, I was struck by the energy in the air. An animated discussion was taking

place, with Professor Gopi Chand Narang, a well-known figure in the literary world, at the center of it all. Though it took me a moment to get my bearings, I realized that they were dissecting the linguistic aspects of Ghalib's poetry. A wave of excitement rushed through me, as I had always been drawn to the intricacies of linguistics.

Professor Narang's presentation was captivating, but I couldn't help but notice certain inconsistencies in his arguments. As a student of linguistics, I felt compelled to share my observations. When the time came for questions, my hand shot up, eagerly awaiting recognition, but the room seemed to look past me.

Undeterred, I persisted in my efforts to contribute. Finally, after several others had spoken, I was granted the floor. I began to voice my questions and observations, only to be abruptly interrupted by Aal Ahmad Suroorr Sahib, the session's chair. He demanded that I introduce myself before proceeding with my critique.

So, I did. I explained that I was a B.A. student from Aligarh, studying under Professor Masood Hussain Khan, a distinguished authority in Urdu linguistics. With my introduction out of the way, I carefully laid out my objections to the presentation.

Instead of directly addressing my concerns, Professor Narang opted for a more evasive approach, conceding some points but deflecting others with a dismissive, "You're right, but sometimes this happens." The audience seemed to sense his reluctance to fully engage with my questions, leaving the room abuzz with murmurs and speculation.

As the session came to a close and the tea break began, I was suddenly surrounded by older attendees, congratulating me and patting me on the back. They seemed to relish the fact that I had put a renowned professor on the spot. In that moment, I realized just how much politicking and factionalism lay beneath the surface of these seemingly innocuous literary meetings.

Little did I know, by challenging Professor Narang in front of his peers, I had inadvertently become entwined in the complex web of politics that defined the world of Urdu literature.

23
Rats, Termites, and Muslims

During my stay in Delhi, I had the opportunity to spend several days at Jawaharlal Nehru University. In those days, the old campus regularly hosted exhibitions of communist literature sponsored by the Russian embassy. Beautifully bound volumes of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and other similar thinkers and authors were available at incredibly low prices. Students would often pick up these books less for the purpose of reading and more for decorating their rooms. As a byproduct of these exhibitions, dealers of old books would also gather there, sometimes offering valuable finds at remarkably low prices.
I managed to pick a few books from this pile of old literature, one of which was Franz Kafka's famous work, "The Metamorphosis." The book was short, and I found myself engrossed in it right from the start. I would pause occasionally, contemplating in awe and amazement as I found myself in a completely new world. Then, I would reflect upon my personal and national identity. It felt as if this story was speaking to me on a symbolic level, conveying so much more than just its literal meaning. I can't quite put my finger on it, but the best way to describe the experience would be to say that I felt I was in the throes of a paradigm shift. The story moved me in a way that changed my perspective on life and left me questioning the reality I had come to know.

The story unfurled as Gregor Samsa awoke one fateful morning to a disturbing revelation: his human form had been usurped by that of a grotesque insect. Panicked, he surveyed his surroundings; this was no dream. He attempted to rise, but his new body, with its short, curved legs, betrayed him. An overwhelming helplessness engulfed him. "What on earth has happened to me?"
With the weight of providing for his family now resting solely on him, his grotesque transformation became a harrowing reality. His loved ones, unable to hide their pity, could offer no remedy. The metamorphosis had altered his very existence, dictating new,

unsettling necessities. A diet of rot and decay replaced sustenance, while beds and furniture became mere relics of a past life. His mother, seeking to provide some semblance of comfort, cleared his room of its once treasured contents.

As his favorite belongings were stripped away, a sorrowful Samsa, now unrecognizable in his insect form, felt a profound pain. The removal of his cherished painting was a poignant blow, leading him to cling desperately to one corner in silent protest. For a brief moment, his sister provided for his new, peculiar needs, but the resources of an insect could only last so long.
Samsa's existence evolved into a heavy burden on his family, who, with no income and growing despair, sought solace in renting out parts of their home. What once belonged to Samsa was now filled with the discarded remnants of his former life. Overcome by an inexplicable urge to venture outside on a balmy day, Samsa slid the door open with great effort, stepping into the world beyond. His presence horrified the tenants, who recoiled in terror. Who could bear to live in a place plagued by such monstrous creatures?
His family's mounting disdain for his very existence proved too much for Samsa, and with a heavy heart, he succumbed to the final, tragic embrace of suicide.

Imagine, just for a moment, the overwhelming sense of helplessness that would wash over a person when he finds himself suddenly transformed into an insect. Once, he held the esteemed position of a dignified human, only to be reduced to a creature most consider insignificant, easily crushed underfoot without a second thought. The Muslims of India in 1947 experienced a catastrophe akin to this nightmarish metamorphosis. In the very country they had nurtured with their blood, sweat, and tears for centuries, they found themselves outsiders. Their history, their symbols, their contributions were all cast aside, their alleged deficiencies mockingly labeled as "mutilated." Blamed for the economic struggles of the nation due to poverty and large families, they were subjected to forced sterilization in a desperate bid to control their population. The film "Qissa kursi ka" portrays

them as rats, consuming the nation's resources, the source of its stifled progress.

Although Amit Shah's emergence had not yet come to pass, it was clear that the Indian Muslims were being stripped of their human dignity in the eyes of their fellow countrymen. As I read the book, I couldn't help but be haunted by my father's words: it would take a generation for the true extent of the deception and tragedy Indian Muslims faced in the name of freedom and partition to be fully understood.

Peering into the dark depths of my own history within this context, it felt as though a veil had been lifted, exposing bitter and harrowing truths. I couldn't help but wonder: how can we address our helplessness without returning to our true ideological foundations? As long as the rulers of this country and our fellow citizens continue to perceive us as mere insects, how can we ever hope to be treated with the respect and dignity we deserve, standing as equals?

The evening at Ganga Hostel had a palpable energy, buzzing with excitement and anticipation. The area near the slope, usually the go-to spot for casual tea sipping and idle chit-chat among students, had now transformed into a lively hub of cultural activity. The hostel was celebrating its annual cultural event, showcasing various art forms from across the region.

A troupe of singers from Tonk had descended upon the scene, enrapturing the audience with their mesmerizing performances of Chahar Bait poetry. With each rhythmic beat of the daf, they painted vivid images of love and longing, piercing the hearts of their listeners with their emotive verses. The crowd hung onto every word, swaying together in unison to the hypnotic rhythm.

In the midst of the performance, one of the singers rose to address the audience, speaking passionately about the centuries-old tradition of Chahar Bait poetry. He lamented its steady decline and urged those present to preserve and cherish this beautiful art form, lest it fade away into the annals of history.

As the twilight deepened, the scene took on an almost otherworldly quality. Students gathered under the trees, their faces illuminated by

the soft glow of lanterns, while the breeze whispered gently through the leaves above. The atmosphere was charged with an electric mix of camaraderie and cultural appreciation, as if a desert caravan had found respite in a lush valley of artistic expression.
But as the night wore on and the poetry became more complex, the students' attention began to shift. The focus of the gathering gradually turned from appreciation of the art to the subtle nuances of human connection, as friendships were forged and strengthened in the shared experience. Amidst this celebration of culture, few had the time or inclination to dwell on the lament of a fading language and tradition, choosing instead to immerse themselves in the vibrant tapestry of the present.

As I sat beside the young man, I inquired, "Have you ever experienced this ensemble before?" He responded, "I find myself astonished that solely with the aid of the daf, this lyrical sequence of stories and tales can enrapture an audience for hours, and how much pain lingers within this expression."
Indeed, it is the fading art of a once vibrant nation, bestowing pleasure even as it vanishes, much like a lamp that flares with a brilliant light before succumbing to darkness. A young man, bearing the semblance of a cleric, interjected from nearby.
"Interesting!" I exclaimed, caught off guard by his observation. Regardless, I asked, "What brings you here?" Before he could utter a word, the initial young man chimed in, "This is my friend Haider, pursuing his MA in foreign languages at the center, and I am known as Ahmad Sayhouni."
My intrigue piqued upon hearing the word Sayhouni, synonymous with Zionist. He continued, "Call me Ahmad Masoni," or Masonic. "What do you mean, 'call me'? Is that what others refer to you as? Why not reveal your true self?"
He replied, "That tale is for another time. For now, you should know that some call me Comrade Ahmad." I delighted in a certain nuance of Ahmad's discourse. I pondered the myriad facets of one's character, the slippery, ever-shifting, and mutable nature of identity. I asked, "What's the story behind being Sayhouni? And then, you descended

from that position and embraced the Masonic. Do any of these monikers serve as your nom de plume?"
"No, it's not like that," he explained. "Once a person distances themselves from their prior identity, they struggle to find comfort in another. Alas, what choice do I have? Circumstance compels me to adapt."

What does it mean? I couldn't quite grasp it. He spoke, his voice filled with a strange mix of emotions, "You people cannot fathom the nature of this struggle. You dwell on the tiny island of Aligarh, where the slightest deviation from your beliefs puts Islam in peril. We, too, once lived within the sheltered confines of Darul Uloom Deoband, wrapped in our own little world. Haider arrived here just this year, while I've spent four years attempting to decipher the enigmatic politics of this place. Amidst this fervor, I sometimes morphed into a comrade, and at other times, I strode two steps ahead, proving my revolutionary spirit by dubbing myself Ahmad Sayhouni. Then it occurred to me that perhaps 'Masonic' was a more palatable and acceptable term. But beneath the surface of all these designations lay a singular desire: to find a vast playground for myself in the atmosphere of JNU, where the space for struggle and action with a pure Muslim identity was scarce."

So what happened then? Becoming a comrade should have been enough for this work. He replied, a tinge of melancholy coloring his voice, "On the surface, it does seem that way. I transformed into a comrade at the first jolt, and even today, numerous editions of the great texts on communism are scattered throughout my room. My bookshelves overflow with works by Russian authors. I spent considerable time immersing myself in the complexities of bourgeoisie and proletariat, teaching others about class struggle. This emblem of comradeship still hangs from my shoulder, but despite all this, perhaps due to my Muslim identity, I remained on the fringes of the left movement. I could not secure a specific role at the center."
"But why? They are always in search of people like you." He sighed, "One reason is the prejudice that Hindu comrades harbor in their hearts for Muslim comrades. The second reason is their expectation

that once we become party members, we should completely renounce our Muslim identity."

"But if you can embrace both Zionism and Masonry, why would there be any room for complaint?" He replied, a wistful air about him, "It's a reaction, you see. I spent years working alongside the All India Students Federation (AISF). It was through my efforts that many Muslim students became part of the leftist political movement. During that time, I discovered an abandoned mosque near the old campus in need of restoration. The area had a sparse Muslim population, so the JNU students devised a program to make their way to the mosque for Friday prayers as part of a campaign. I, too, was a part of this group, and it was an opportunity for me to reconnect with my faith and participate in Friday prayers after a long absence. Yet, my involvement was met with disapproval from within the party ranks. Friends accused me of being regressive, and my loyalty to the party became questionable. I couldn't help but think how peculiar these people were—they could visit temples, partake in Hindu festivals with zeal and fervor, and their Marxist beliefs remained untarnished. However, they expect us Muslims to relinquish our religious practices and cultural identity entirely. The sad irony is that despite all this, we still find ourselves on the periphery; there's no place for us at the center of it all."

"So, have you said your goodbyes to the party now?" I asked. He responded with a wistful smile, "In practice, I have, though they still consider me one of their own."
"And why not just sever ties with the Communists completely?" I probed further.
He sighed, "You see, this is JNU, and there's no better group for survival here than the Communists. They hold sway among the faculty and play a vital role in organizing events. If you enter JNU and leave without joining the Communist circle, you haven't truly experienced the essence of this place. Pure Muslim identity doesn't leave much room for you here or anywhere else. However, engaging in conversations about the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and the Marxist

interpretation of life and methodology somehow renders you somewhat acceptable. The few Muslims you see on this campus have arrived through the same path."
He paused and looked into the distance, his eyes filled with determination. "Anyway, let us continue this struggle. You keep raising your voice for 'Islam is in danger' in Aligarh. Your task is comparatively easy, even very easy." With that, Ahmad extended his hand for a farewell handshake.

The night had deepened, and the euphoric symphony of the musicians' ensemble, an intricate tapestry of vocals and instruments, now held sway over the ambience. People were immersed in a blissful rapture. I bid adieu to these distinguished figures; for today, this enchanting experience had surely been enough.

At JNU, where I was staying, it wasn't far to Professor Muzaffar Alam's home. On a lazy Sunday morning, my brother and I ventured out to visit him. We found Mushir ul Hasan, who would later become Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Millia, already there. Conversations swirled, flowing from the challenges faced by Muslims to the current climate in Aligarh. Muzaffar Alam passionately emphasized that as part of the Ummah, a weighty responsibility was upon their shoulders, one they simply couldn't ignore. They had to honor this commitment in every possible way.

Witnessing the heartfelt concern these men had for Islam and Muslims, it became clear that even though they had taken on progressive or Marxist personas in order to find acceptance in a contentious environment, their hearts hadn't turned away from caring for Islam and the Muslim community. A question emerged: was it truly necessary to abandon one's original identity in order to be embraced by progressive circles? I couldn't help but remember the words of Ahmed Sahyouni, a Deoband graduate who felt he had no future at JNU unless he adopted a new communist persona. It seemed like such a high price to pay.

Still, this conundrum is centered around navigating a hostile atmosphere. It remains puzzling why the people of Aligarh, who championed progressive thought and took pride in labeling themselves as Marxists, felt the need for a new identity despite being surrounded by a Muslim-majority environment.

As I left Aligarh, the university had found itself embroiled in an impassioned struggle between Muslims and Communists. Students championed the Islamic perspective, while their adversaries included the 'progressive' proponents such as Professor Irfan Habib and those with Communist leanings. Irfan sahib and the Communist Party, however, found themselves opposed by these students. The professor had cultivated a substantial following among both teaching and non-teaching staff, allowing him to exploit hunger strikes, sit-ins, and protests to assert his dogged convictions whenever he pleased.
Whispers of his impressive reputation rippled through the student body, with many speaking of his esteemed publications gracing the halls of Oxford, claiming there was no other scholar of his caliber within the university. He skillfully nurtured devotees in academic circles, disciples who were ever ready to celebrate his every word.
Upon Syed Hamid sahib's arrival in Aligarh as the Vice-Chancellor, he initially sought to curtail Irfan sahib's influence. However, fearing the consequences of challenging his trade unionism, the Vice-Chancellor adopted a more conciliatory stance. Meanwhile, students labored to paint him as a sinister figure.

I still vividly recall a fervent senior student, who later became a professor of pharmacology, delivering an impassioned speech to a throng of students pouring from Habib Hall, urging them to oppose Syed Hamid: "If they have bullets in their guns, we don't need to be scared; we'll fight them with our nails and teeth, and on the strength of our faith, we will defeat them openly." Leaders of the Students' Union were also not far behind in delivering such fiery speeches. The result was that a fictional war between Islam versus secularism and obscurantism versus progressive had engulfed the entire university.

One day, while wandering through the maze of information in the JNU central library, my eyes landed on a captivating piece in the Economic and Political Weekly. Its title? "AMU and Irfan Habib." The talented author, M.Y. Qazi, took readers on an emotional rollercoaster, unveiling the complex dynamics between the communist factions, Irfan Habib, and the Aligarh Muslim University.

Qazi made it clear that the communists' tendency to elevate their own could have a powerful and lasting impact, creating an environment where the individual overshadows the party or institution. Through a masterful blend of poignant anecdotes and thought-provoking analysis, Qazi unraveled the enigmatic figure of Irfan Habib—born in Aligarh, shaped by the unwavering support of his community, and eventually wielding immense influence through his union activism.

But even with this power, the professor didn't shy away from confrontation, a decision that had significant consequences. The heartrending accounts of those affected by his decisions gave readers a glimpse into the soul of a man who, despite his intellect and professional stature, rejected peace and compromise.

Qazi's prose took us through a series of gripping exchanges between those who supported Irfan Habib and those who were critical of him. This intense and emotional narrative made it impossible not to question whether the Indian communists were truly dedicated to the cause of socialism, or if they were more interested in advancing their own interests.

As I flipped through the pages of past issues, it became evident that many letters to the editor passionately supported Irfan Habib. These voices emerged from various corners of India, standing in solidarity with the professor, insisting that the attacks on him were, in fact, attacks on academic freedom itself.

And yet, I couldn't help but reflect on the stark contrast between the unwavering support of a nationwide party and the innocent, zealous students of Aligarh who were simply fighting for what they believed in. The struggle was profoundly imbalanced, and Irfan Habib's adeptness at navigating such uneven battles left a lasting impression.

Years later, when I found myself returning to the hallowed halls of the university as a professor, I was plunged headfirst into the swirling vortex of conspiracies stirred up by the enigmatic Irfani clique. Within the ivy-covered walls, Irfan Sahab's army of acolytes and champions regarded my arrival as nothing less than a seismic shift and a looming threat to the university's cherished ideological fabric.

The ever-scheming Irfan Sahab himself penned a missive to Veda Prakash Sahab the UGC Chairman of that time, painting me as an intellectual pariah—an unacademic pamphleteer, and the author of the incendiary 'Ghalba-e-Islam.' As if to bolster his case, he cited my seemingly unfavorable views on the venerable Gandhi.

At first, I chose to tread lightly, adopting a policy of discretion, and sidestepping any confrontation with this influential figure. But when the cacophony of his machinations showed no signs of abating, I could no longer remain silent. With an unsolicited newspaper statement, I fired back, vehemently denouncing his pseudo-intellectual bullying.

Aligarh, November 22, 2013: Recent conflicts between Aligarh Historians Society and university administration have been painted as an academician versus military clash by some newspapers. In my opinion, this disruption by the leftist faction should be seen as their crumbling grip on the Muslim University. These thoughts were expressed by Professor Rashid Shaz while addressing the weekly meeting of the 'Al-Madrasah Society' Bridge Course, where he was discussing the topic of 'Aligarh's need for new intellectual freedom.' He stated that universities and institutions cannot achieve their goals in an environment where a single group or individual has closed all doors to alternative perspectives. For the past 30-40 years, Professor Irfan Habib and his followers have waged a war against intellectual freedom and the diverse academic environment of the university. Before General Shah's reign, it was generally believed that adherence to the leftist protocol was essential for appointments and promotions in key academic positions. So-called Marxists elevated Professor Irfan Habib's imaginary deity to such an extent that the general public was left in awe. As a result, their hidden decisions and opinions became decisive in university affairs. The biggest casualty of this situation was

the entry of Irfan Habib's cheerleaders into the Department of History and other related institutions, rather than genuine scholars. No one bothered to find out the truth behind this mythical narrative – how many universities in the world offer specialized study of medieval Indian history? If there is any competition, it's from a few universities outside Aligarh and a handful of colleges in Pakistan and Bangladesh. This is the reality of our historian's so-called international faculty status.

Professor Shaz emphasized the importance of fostering a vibrant and intellectually stimulating environment at the university by providing equal opportunities for diverse perspectives to thrive. Students should be encouraged to engage with different ideas and maintain their academic journey amidst various viewpoints. They should be informed that they can build upon their teachers' scholarly achievements and the books they have written. However, it is crucial to view their teachers as researchers and seekers of truth, not idolize them, refrain from worshipping them, and avoid considering them as the ultimate authority academically.

Professor Shaz also expressed astonishment that the university community has not yet felt the need to critically evaluate the unfounded academic claims made by the Irfani group. Their most significant work, the "Atlas of the Mughal Empire," has been deemed "amateurish" by renowned cartographer Joseph Schwartzberg. He believes that the author's overreliance on merely three well-known maps has hindered their ability to establish a unique approach and transform their work into an extensive scholarly analysis and valuable educational resource.

Professor Shaz went on to say that Irfan Habib only refers to Sadiq Isfahani as a Mughal cartographer, which doesn't imply that there were no other skilled practitioners in this field. Muslim scholars have a remarkable history in cartography. Setting aside Arab and Persian contributions, various styles of maps could be found in the personal collections of scholars in Mughal India. The unearthing of four-meter-long maps, representing both local and global scales from the collection of the Maharaja of Jaipur, serves as evidence that Irfan Habib's atlas

isn't the first endeavor in this lineage. However, it fails to acknowledge numerous previous sources deliberately.

When asked about their opinion on his main work, The Agrarian System of Mughal India, Professor Shaz said that scholars do consider it a good effort, but its claims are questionable from a theoretical standpoint. The claim by Professor Irfan Habib that the Mughal nobility exploited farmers to such an extent that they were forced to rebel against the government, does not hold up under scrutiny. In recent years, individuals like Frank Perlin, David Washbrook, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have debunked Irfan Habib and Shireen Moosvi's baseless claims that revenue was collected at such a large scale that no path for economic growth at the grassroots level could survive. Frank Els has proven through financial records that the claims of Irfan Habib and Shireen Moosvi collapse under the weight of their internal contradictions. However, despite this, Irfan Habib is considered a polymath among his followers. They have never seen a greater scholar than him in the land of Aligarh. The reason for this is that Irfan Habib never confronts his intellectual equals or superiors during their lifetime. He had to wait for Edward Said's death to attack him. His scholarly stature is invulnerable because he does not engage in dialogue with living people. When his statement came out recently in the context of minority characters in the university, I had expressed a desire that this is not a historical issue but a political one, so Irfan Habib should present his arguments in an open debate. However, those who deem it appropriate to confront their opponents after they have died, who award PhDs to their students based on plagiarized manuscripts of Parmatma Saran, and who shamelessly write in the preface of its publication that a great deal of hard work has been put into the English translation of Tarikh Qandhari, while the student writes that he received Irfan Habib's encouragement and guidance at every step in this work – the foundations of such people's magical scholarly castles may contain countless buried Parmatma Sarans. If only a researcher could uncover this mystery.

As soon as this statement saw the light of day, an unmistakable silence enveloped their camp, casting a hush over the once-bustling atmosphere.

One day, as I shared tea with Comrade Ahmad at Ganga Dhaba, I spotted Saghir Bhai. He was accompanied by two gentlemen I didn't recognize. I greeted them warmly, soon learning they were in Delhi as part of a student delegation to meet with national leaders. Some of their peers lodged at Jamia Millia, having just met with Syed Shahabuddin and Syed Aminul Hasan Rizvi. Saghir Bhai, a senior law student at Aligarh, piqued my interest. I asked if he had any notion of when the university might reopen. He replied that predicting the future was difficult since police surveillance blanketed the area. Vice-Chancellor Syed Hamid remained steadfast, refusing to yield to the students' demands.

Comrade Ahmad sought to uncover the tangled desires of the students, the complex web of emotions and demands that had surfaced. Saghir Bhai illuminated the intricate tapestry: initially, students simply wanted Irfan Habib's resignation, but Aftab's tragic martyrdom had cast a darker shadow over their cause.
A gentleman who had accompanied them whispered that Rizvi Sahib had even refused to shake hands with Syed Hamid, accusing the Vice-Chancellor's hands of being stained with the blood of an innocent student.
"Can that be true?" I inquired, seeking to confirm this provocative claim. But before the gentleman could respond, Saghir Bhai erupted into laughter, the sound cascading through the air like a waterfall. "Ah, my friend, such traditional rumors always find their way into these situations, like weeds growing through the cracks in a sidewalk. It's as though we're applauding the notion that Irfan Sahib's books are popular at Oxford and Cambridge – every group needs a rallying cry, a spark to ignite their propaganda." Comrade Ahmad, his curiosity piqued, asked about the inquiry he had heard whispers of.
Saghir Bhai sighed, a melancholy cloud descending over his features. "My dear brother, this isn't some serious intellectual dispute that can

be resolved through reconciliation or understanding. No, this is a battle for power, a struggle as old as time. The communists have had their grip on the university for years, and they won't easily unclench their fists."

I couldn't help but wonder why the Vice-Chancellor, a man of reason and intellect, couldn't see through the communists' machinations. Saghir Bhai, perceiving my thoughts, answered, "While Syed Hamid may possess admirable qualities, he remains a traditional bureaucrat – and bureaucrats, like cogs in a machine, inevitably bow to the pressure of organized groups and union power. Syed Hamid may desire to seize the new opportunities arising from the restoration of the university's minority character, crafting concrete plans for the Muslim minority. Yet those who have occupied the university for so long, like ghosts haunting its halls, feel threatened by this new minority character."

"Ultimately, why is this the case? This is a matter of our collective welfare and progress," I said with an almost childlike innocence. Saghir Bhai couldn't help but smile at my naiveté. He explained, "The communist lobby, which has long held sway over the university, now fears that after the restoration of the minority character, organizations such as the Muslim Majlis Mashawarat, Jamaat-e-Islami, and the AMU Action Committee will take control of the university court—the institution with the highest authority in the university. They feel their power ebbing away with the restoration of the minority character."

"Interesting! I had no idea," Comrade Ahmad expressed his astonishment. "I thought it was a battle between regressive thinking and progressive ideas."

"Yes, the communist comrades have always given such an impression through their eloquent statements," continued Saghir Bhai. "But little did anyone know that during the past three years alone, Professor Irfan Habib has organized more than 200 strikes involving grade three and grade four employees. He has control over various unions within the university. He has even gone on hunger strikes for the rights of grade four employees, and through these tactics, he has gradually emerged as an invincible force. Now, the restoration of minority representation has dampened his ambitions."

Yet, out there in the world, the perception prevails that their objective is to elevate the university's academic standards and curb the regressive and sectarian forces. Observing Ahmad's impression, an enigmatic smile graced Saghir Bhai's face. He spoke, "These individuals are quick to accuse others of regressive thinking, but in reality, they themselves are incapable of tolerating even the slightest opposition. If someone isn't part of their clique, they are deemed sectarian or regressive. Surprisingly, they even consider the student union leaders to be fundamentalists and sectarian, despite the fact that they are merely ordinary students with no allegiance to any ideological faction."

"The heart of the matter," Saghir Bhai began, his eyes dancing with the weight of the tale he was about to unfold. He set his tea aside, casually unbuttoned his jacket, and inched his chair closer, as if to fully immerse himself in the warm, golden sun that accompanied the words he'd soon share. "For sixteen tireless years, Muslims had been fighting to restore the university's minority character. Mrs. Gandhi, having risen like a phoenix from the ashes of the Emergency, wove this restoration into her election manifesto, a nod to those who yearned for change.

"In the aftermath of Moradabad's blood-streaked tragedy, Congress scrambled to prove their commitment to the Muslim vote. The year was 1981, and the air was heavy with anticipation as Parliament braced itself for a new bill that might mend the fragile balance. It was then that Irfan Habib, ensconced in his role as the Dean of Social Sciences, delivered an interview to an Indian Express journalist. That conversation held the power to eviscerate the hard-fought campaign for minority character. It was, perhaps, Habib's final stab at sabotage.

"Against all odds, the bill passed, a testament to the resilience of those who had poured their lives into the cause. But the sting of betrayal from one of the university's own teachers proved unbearable for those who had long championed the cause. Rage coursed through the veins of the students, fanning the flames of polarization that would soon engulf the entire university."

So there it is, the hidden story behind this whole affair. Just take a moment to grasp the contrast between what things truly are and the

façade they present. Where lies the so-called progressive thinking, and what does obscurantism even mean? You see, my dear friend, I've always believed that we should steer clear of these loaded terms that only serve to muddy the waters. With a sense of resolve, Ahmed rose to his feet.

24
Entangled in the Crimson Web

During my extended stay at JNU, I found myself sinking deeper into a world of books and contemplation. Mornings were filled with the anticipation of what the library would reveal, as I borrowed a new book each day, losing myself within its pages. I'd spend hours perusing newspapers, magazines, and various encyclopedias, constantly amazed by the incredible discoveries I stumbled upon.

One fateful day, I found an article illustrating the scientific and cultural advancements of the twentieth century. Time seemed to stop as I immersed myself in this captivating work, feeding my curiosity and sparking a sense of wonder. Each day, I hoped for that sudden window of enlightenment to appear, casting light upon the endless sea of knowledge surrounding me.

It was during this introspective period that I encountered the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, discovering the complex world of Marxism along the way. Eliot's words seemed to resonate with my soul, drawing me in with his eloquent language and evocative imagery. Although fully understanding his poetry was not easy, I found pleasure in exploring its depths and layers of meaning.

Frequently, I'd find solace in the shadows of distant trees, nestled upon a rocky outcrop, a poetry collection in hand. The melodious songs of birds filled the air as the towering minaret of the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque stood as a testament to faith and history. Even as the cool winter breeze brushed against my face, I'd bask in the golden warmth of the sun, and read Eliot's poetry from a place of reverence.

As I read Eliot's famous poem "The Hollow Men," lines like "Our dried voices, when / We whisper together / Are quiet and meaningless" struck a chord deep within me. The poet described a world of shadows and decay, where thoughts and reality, movement and action were shrouded in a nebulous haze. This echoed my own small universe, where imagination and creativity, emotions and reactions were similarly obscured by shadows.

"This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but with a whimper."
Such is the dirge of life's bleakness, where every act seems tinged with the deceit of borrowed authority, where everything feels hollow and decay seeps into the very fabric of our existence. In this desolate state, even the realm of dreams offers no refuge. The courage to open our eyes in the dream world remains elusive, as we find ourselves adrift in the twilight of our own making.

In those days, impassioned debates arose from the thoughtless mimicry of the West within the context of Shariati's teachings. As I attended gatherings of left-leaning students, conversations would inevitably touch upon the timeless struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These committed students had enmeshed the Marxist interpretation within the very fabric of their existence, making it seem like an eternal and unchanging truth. Consequently, they appeared unwilling to consider alternative methods of interpretation or understanding.
Whenever I found myself among them, their unwavering faith seemed to burn with intensity, effectively snuffing out the potential for meaningful dialogue. It appeared as though an ominous shadow had been cast, obscuring the link between interpretation and action for these passionate youths.
I remained lost in these thoughts for a time, until I noticed someone emerging from the thicket below, seemingly climbing towards me.
Ah, there was Ahmed, and someone else accompanying him. Hassan, of all people! What a delightful surprise. I had been looking for him, and in that moment, I embraced him with warmth and familiarity.
Hassan spoke, his words carrying a certain depth, "We ventured near *Majnu ka Teela* in search of you. Serendipity led us to this meeting. Just yesterday, I returned from Bombay with a renewed sense of purpose, an unwavering determination to complete my PhD swiftly. Upon hearing of your arrival from Ahmed, I couldn't help but come searching." Hassan Idrisi was an extraordinary scholar, his expertise woven through language and literature. He was blessed with an

exceptional flair for poetry and an insatiable thirst for knowledge, fueled by his lofty ambitions.
His pursuits had led him to Bombay, a city of dreams, where he had dabbled in the film industry, hoping to find a foothold in the world of scriptwriting. Yet, a melancholic air clung to him, a sense of unfulfilled longing. Whispers swirled, attributing this disposition to the anguish of unrequited love.
Often, he could be found seated on a stone bench for hours, near the path to the girls' hostel. Was he seeking solace or waiting, consumed by the hope of catching a fleeting glimpse of her? Stories like these defined Hassan's mystique. Even in a place like JNU, where tales of love were as abundant as the stars, there was something about these anecdotes that rendered Hassan an enigma, an introspective soul grappling with unseen turbulence. Today, our unexpected reunion stirred a wave of nostalgia, as memories, long buried, resurfaced in vivid detail.

"A truly marvelous spot you've picked out, the view of Mehrauli from here just captivates the soul," they said as they nestled into a slab of a neighboring rock. "And the Qutub Minar, so tantalizingly close from this vantage point. One can't help but ponder the grandeur of the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque in bygone days." Ahmad's musings on the panorama possessed an air of yearning, as though he sought to pierce through the layers of time and unearth the history buried beneath these stones.

"The once-magnificent power of Islam has evaporated, leaving behind only a smattering of comrades who stare wistfully at the echoes of bygone majesty," I teased Ahmad with a touch of whimsy.
"Even those alleged comrades aren't quite the real deal. We've merely cloaked ourselves in a masquerade of fellowship," Hasan expounded poetically. "You cannot begin to comprehend the arduous task of bearing the weight of an external persona, layered over one's genuine core. At times, you might feel as if you've been entirely consumed by it. But then, a tremor stirs within, whispering that you are not that facade—you are something entirely different, hidden beneath."

"You've touched the essence of the matter," he continued with introspection. "This inner voice isn't a solitary murmur; it also resonates from those you once considered staunch supporters and allies, those who claimed the ties of mutual comradeship. When they observe your grip tightening within the party or see you ascending to the heights of pivotal positions, their actions strike a chord, a poignant reminder that you are not the person you masquerade as. Your soul still harbors the vestiges of Islam, casting a shadow on your loyalty. You're right—straddling the chasm between two realms leaves one in a perpetual state of limbo, never truly belonging anywhere."

"There's a group of freethinkers; why didn't you join them?" I asked, curiosity simmering. Ahmad sighed and said, "At first, I contemplated joining them, but the group was small, a mere flicker of defiance. Sure, some saw themselves as freethinkers in the realm of fashion, but when it came to politics and society, they remained on the fringes. The center stage was dominated by leftist student organizations, so I thought, if I wanted to dive headfirst into university life, why not align myself with the communists?"
"You came from a religious institution, didn't you?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise. "That must have been a challenging decision."
He shook his head, eyes wide. "Not just challenging, it felt nearly impossible. My old friends, they were taken aback when they found out. Some accused me of slipping into disbelief and atheism, while others severed ties with me, like cutting the thread of a friendship bracelet."
"What sparked the transformation of a Deoband graduate into a comrade at JNU?"
"Don't ask me," he said with a weary smile. "Ask Hasan. He was the one who brought me here, but even then, we harbored a sincere passion within, a flame that refused to die."
"Sincere passion?" I expressed my astonishment.
He nodded. "Yes, only a few days after arriving at JNU, I felt as though I had emerged from the Cave of the Seven Sleepers, awakening after a decade or more. It was a transformed world, a place where my previous life held little value. Reflecting on my days in

Deoband, I marveled at how we had remained confined to our own imaginary island, oblivious to the world beyond, like explorers too afraid to leave the safety of their shores. Our connection to the outside world was tenuous, fraying like a worn rope. Now that I had to engage with a new reality, I thought, if I were to confine myself within conservative religious boundaries even here, then what would be the purpose of attending a modern university? My yearning for a fulfilling intellectual life led me to the leftist faction."

"Do you regret your decision?" I asked tentatively.

He replied, the conviction in his voice palpable, "Regret? It was a well-considered, independent choice. Had I not made it, I would have experienced remorse. Some of my friends believe I've betrayed my faith. But can a Muslim's faith ever truly be erased from their heart? Faith is woven into the fabric of our being, a pattern that remains, no matter the changes in our lives."

"Balancing these two conflicting personas must have been emotionally taxing for you - Comrade on one side and Ahmad on the other."

This phenomenon is referred to as Borrowed Identity Syndrome. Hasan attempted to unveil the intricacies of this state of mind. He expounded, "When you're forced to assume an alien identity, your core self fragments into various alternative aspects. At times, the situation escalates, leaving you disconnected from your true essence. I've been through a phase when my original identity blurred, as I became so attuned to my environment and those around me. It's a profoundly complicated matter. One day, while at a lemonade stand, I ordered some lemonade. Fresh lemon slices lay before me on the table, and I thought I'd squeeze them myself. As I embarked on this task, I found myself squeezing lemons into one glass after another. The vendor tried to intervene, but I was relentless. Finally, a friend managed to convince me - not without great difficulty - that I was a patron, not the proprietor."

"Remarkable! It's quite a disconcerting situation to be in."

He responded, "When you bear the weight of a borrowed identity, it demands a price from you."

"But the storm of mental anguish that has ravaged your soul, countless tales about it float on the whispers of the public." As these words

reached Hasan Bhai's ears, a tender smile bloomed on his face. He said, "You see, here lies the conundrum of straddling two worlds simultaneously. Once upon a time, I was an unwavering communist, taking pride in wearing the label of a Marxist. During those days, the remnants of an ancient mosque emerged from the shadows, just across the street near the old campus. The Muslim population in this area was a mere whisper. A handful of Muslim university staff and students took it upon themselves to offer Friday prayers there, after breathing life into the dilapidated structure. And so, it fell upon the shoulders of Muslim students to partake in the Friday prayers en masse, to fortify our claim to the mosque. I, the die-hard communist, had been neglecting Friday prayers for ages, but now it was time to stand in solidarity with Islam. Ask Ahmed! In those days, we put everything on the line in myriad ways. We plunged headlong into this crusade. One day, as I donned a cap and boarded the bus with fellow Muslim students to attend Friday prayers, my gaze collided with Varsha's as she disembarked from the back door. Our eyes locked, and I offered my customary smile. But her visage was etched with shock and confusion. Later, she confronted me, accusing me of being a reactionary. She had believed me to be a beacon of progressivism. I attempted to elucidate my actions, but her ears were deaf to my explanations. In her eyes, my communism was nothing but a masquerade. It seemed as if the sudden unveiling of my Muslim identity shattered something within her. That was the crux of it." Hasan Bhai's voice trailed off into silence. The gathering lay submerged in stillness for a moment. Then he spoke again, "My friend, when you bear the weight of two souls on your shoulders at once, you inevitably reach a crossroads where you must choose which identity you will preserve and which one you will relinquish. I chose the mosque and laid love upon the altar of sacrifice."

"But this decision, it must have been a profound struggle for you," he said. "For me, it all unfolded in a whirlwind, a sudden jolt of reality. Sure, there were obstacles in embracing this new situation, adopting this stance, but my heart aches for those lost souls who wander their entire lives as humble Marxists, longing for a life brimming with

meaning. There must be an inner voice that echoes within them from time to time, and I can't fathom how they manage to bear it."
"You know, it's also a form of coercion imposed by the system: to play a pivotal role on this country's central stage and to stake one's claim in the world's bounties, Muslims have to suppress their identity or seek refuge in some foreign persona," I emphasized the gravity of the situation.
"Perhaps, then, a life devoted to religious pursuits is the most comforting option. Spend your whole existence tucked away in the sanctuaries of madrassas and monasteries, oblivious to the happenings of the outside world," Ahmed mused.

He spoke, his voice tinged with a melancholy acceptance, "Ah, my friend, even in that supposedly safe haven, the heart suffers its own quiet death. Great spiritual leaders bear the yoke of loyalty to the establishment, their necks weighed down by the burden. The chance to live a truly free Muslim life, one where we can claim our rightful share in this world, seems to be a fleeting dream. If it weren't so, why would Muslims need to search for foreign identities as a means to simply exist?" Hasan Bhai tried to wrap up the conversation, the air heavy with unspoken truths.
My thoughts swirled around the oppressive nature of this system, hidden like a shroud from the unsuspecting masses. Visions of Professor Waqar Hussain's gatherings flickered before my eyes, as he would often say that the most insidious facet of this system is its ability to keep us blind to our true identities and the sinister machinations that operate beneath the surface.

25
Between Faith and Disbelief

The conflict in Aligarh had taken on a new and intricate form, with faith and skepticism locked in a fierce struggle. Actions against the students became more severe, as if the flames of this confrontation wouldn't be easily extinguished. The students viewed every move by Vice Chancellor Syed Hamid as an attack on Islam and Muslims, while Syed Hamid started to see the student leaders as enemies of society.
At the heart of this polarization lay left-wing politics, which had ensnared Syed Hamid without him realizing. A man of great wisdom and insight, he was usually able to understand the core of any issue. However, when it came to the mystic group's propaganda and their unwavering resolve, he was at a loss, and both he and the university paid a heavy price for this misjudgment. Although a devout Muslim in his personal life, left-wing politics painted him as a man devoid of religious beliefs, stubborn, and lacking in nationalism or compassion for his students.

This negative image was far removed from his true nature, but erasing such an impression took considerable time. In fact, this cloud of propaganda hung over his reputation for as long as he remained in Aligarh. Upon returning from a trip to London, he shared a clipping of an article by Peter Watson, which had likely been published in The Times of London. He noted that the thought-provoking piece highlighted crucial issues contributing to the decline of Muslims and should be disseminated within Urdu-speaking circles. It was through Syed Hamid that I first learned of Peter Watson's name, which later led me to explore some of his significant literary works.

Once in Habib Hall, a spark ignited between students and the provost, the flames of conflict licking at the edges of their world. Discipline hung in the balance, threatening to swallow some students whole. Like lost souls, they sought my guidance, and together we embarked on a journey to the lair of Vice-Chancellor Syed Hamid. Engulfed in a

meeting, he emerged, his presence a calming force, to inquire about the raging fire before us. I painted a picture of the university as an intellectual tribe with him as the chief, a leader to whom disputes and discord inevitably travel. We approached him, our hearts heavy with hope, that he would weave his magic and mend the frayed threads connecting the provost and students. Syed Hamid's smile was a balm, and he pledged to fulfill his sacred duty. We retreated with lighter hearts, the specter of disciplinary actions vanquished.
In another twist of fate, students ensnared the proctor in their web, transforming him into a hostage during his visit to Habib Hall to quell a brewing storm. Their demands included the provost's immediate resignation, a sacrifice to the gods of dissent. Chaos unfurled its wings, growing bolder as night swallowed the day. The proctor, a captive in a world gone mad, had no means of escape. Police intervention loomed, threatening to birth a new disaster. At the witching hour, a handful of students and I ventured into the darkness, seeking solace at the Vice-Chancellor's Lodge. Fate intertwined our paths with Shaukat Bhai, a warrior surveying the battlefield. His spirit surged with passion, proclaiming the students were armed with passion and ready for anything. I held my tongue, my mission to extinguish the flames burning within.

In the dead of night, around 1:30 a.m., Syed Hamid presided over a council of war, his administrative team and government officials arrayed around a massive table. I dared to whisper that the dismissal of the provost could quench the students' anger, perhaps even granting the proctor safe passage through the tempest. Without pause, Syed Hamid conjured a letterhead, a parchment of fate, and penned the provost's demise, entrusting it to my care. As the news seeped into the Hall, the storm abated, and the proctor emerged, unscathed, from the jaws of chaos.

At a Drama Club program, an unseemly scene unfolded on stage, stirring up a tense face-off between Islamist and communist students. Syed Sahib, an interesting character himself, called in those responsible for the club. As luck would have it, I was sitting in the

adjacent room of the Vice-Chancellor Lodge, eavesdropping on his reproachful words. Syed Sahib was neither a stubborn nor tradition-hating fellow; rather, he found himself ensnared in the relentless crossfire between Islam and disbelief. Life is peculiar like that, isn't it?
At that time, there was this prevalent notion that thriving in campus life was an uphill battle without some support from the left-wing. The pursuits of two Maulvi sahibs at the Center for Advanced Study of History fueled this belief. Even with their Islamist leanings, they were seen as politically entrenched in the left-wing. Thanks to Syed Sahib's tireless efforts, one of the Maulvi sahibs got a shot at redemption and landed a spot in Islamic Studies. A considerable number of university people had grown disillusioned with left-wing politics but couldn't find their place within Islamic circles. Kind of like being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The Zaidi sisters' plight mirrored this sentiment. They craved a vibrant academic and social life, but Aligarh's traditional society wasn't quite ready to embrace their aspirations. When the sisters pedaled their bicycles across campus, the very symbols of tradition seemed to kneel in submission. Islam, shaped by the values of a feudal society, had only so much room for women like them in social roles. As a result, they reluctantly sought refuge within left-wing ideology.
The chaotic struggle between disbelief and Islam was, in essence, a play of light and shadow. Those who aspired to a key role on life's central stage remained amid this division of light and shadow, sometimes embracing new loyalties willingly and sometimes with reluctance. However, for those who valued staying true to themselves, life wasn't easy in this place, just as it had been throughout history and in different locations.

In Aligarh, the intellectual and ideological fortress of Indian Muslims, a place for which they tirelessly campaigned for sixteen years to reclaim its distinct status, the unconventional began to unfold. In this very place, the need to adopt a foreign identity like Marxism, as opposed to one's true Muslim self, became the unspoken rule in order to capitalize on opportunities. It was a dance between the heart's

conviction and the necessity to align with the left-wing, for without them, one's future in certain departments seemed bleak. The Department of History saw a curious trend, as some Maulvi sahibs found themselves embracing red pragmatism. It only served to reinforce the unsettling idea that devout Muslims posed a threat unless their Islamic identity was shrouded in a left-wing facade. No wonder a festive spirit failed to surface in Aligarh and the broader community, even after the restoration of minority character. The left-wing, adamant and unyielding, sought to paint students as extremists and criminals, plunging the university into a cycle of openings and closures.

As countless students faced expulsion, a semblance of normalcy eventually returned, allowing academic life to flourish once more. However, for those dismissed, the struggle to preserve their student status became a critical concern. Stripped of basic rights, they found solace in the mere fact of being alive, a small victory in a sea of losses. Abandoning the relentless focus on their Muslim identity, protesters started to view the opportunity to participate in exams and earn their degrees as a saving grace. With diplomas in hand, they could venture into the outside world, seeking new possibilities and a chance to begin anew.

The university found its way through disciplinary actions, but the left wing's dominance persisted in the administrative machinery. The agony of borrowed identity continued to haunt. The Department of History, the epicenter of this confusion, saw students engage in a race to distance themselves from their roots and abandon their traditional identity. In a fervor of progressivism, one student even wrote to The Times of India that the 'mute Quran' had started speaking again after ages.

The young man came from a traditional Muslim family, but the dilemma was that there was no other way to find his path in the Department of History. Such statements stirred turbulence in religious circles. Students formed rival groups, and these "red fighters" effortlessly became the favorites of their Marxist mentors. Years later, I encountered one such student at an academic gathering in London.

Initially, we tiptoed around each other, but as the ice melted, I found that beneath the surface, he was a devout Muslim, even more so than me; he believed it sinful to scrutinize and critique the inherited principles of Islam.

Surprised, I thought maybe this mental shift was due to London's influence, where the impacts of Hizb ut-Tahrir and other revivalist movements were growing rapidly. But the truth turned out to be different. Pointing to his red jacket with unpretentiousness and innocence, he said that if he hadn't embraced the stylish red attire, the opportunity to meet me at this gathering wouldn't have materialized.

Changing the external appearance was a matter of "to be or not to be." It was a battle for survival and success, with limited chances of triumph for many. A friend of ours, who later ascended to a high-ranking position overseeing prisons in a provincial government, also donned the fashionable red attire but soon realized he couldn't compete with those who overtly denounced the 'mute Quran' in their writings. It was as if faith restrained him, while disbelief lured him onward, evoking a situation reminiscent of Ghalib's verse:

Bound by faith, yet drawn by disbelief's allure,
The Kaaba in my wake, a church before me, I endure.

26
Imposed Identity

Upon my return home after a two-and-a-half to three-year sojourn in Aligarh, I discovered a world transformed. Little did I anticipate that in such a brief span, my father would enter the twilight of his years, his once-dark hair now overtaken by gray. I searched high and low for my two younger brothers, but they were nowhere in sight. Instead, two considerably older children were present, seemingly at home in our abode. At first, I presumed they were neighbors' offspring; however, when my brothers remained elusive and the older children appeared to be permanent fixtures, I grasped that these were indeed my siblings, now reshaped by the hands of time.

Before my departure, my father's discourse had brimmed with a relentless resolve for change, casting himself as the linchpin of this impending revolution. Presently, his conversations revolved around bequeathing this dream to his progeny. I recollected a time during my youth when he became agitated while interpreting the phrase "ما تعبدونَ من بعدی" (whom you worship after me), barely managing to utter, "Yes, it's an immense responsibility, a daunting obligation." Now, he aspired to pass the torch of monotheism into his children's grasp. It appeared as though each sentence he spoke posed the question, "مَا تعبدونَ مِن بعدی؟" (Whom will you worship after me?).

Abba had a habit of attentively listening to the tales of his children's accomplishments, eagerly delving into the particulars. He was astonished to discover that ideological and collective struggles had established numerous trials for students, even within contemporary secular educational institutions.

Zahida Zaidi, a left-wing advocate, taught American literature. She briefly became my tutor, but our partnership ended quickly, and I sought a new mentor. On the other hand, teachers like Asloob Ansari were known for their staunch beliefs. Ansari famously walked out of a meeting with senior teachers when he took offense to a comment about

the Prophet's dignity that seemed disrespectful. Ideological affiliations played a considerable role within the university.
My father noticed my mental struggle and explained that our true test lies in staying true to our beliefs under all circumstances. This idea aligns with the Quranic verse, "أصلها ثابت وفرعها في السماء" (its roots are firmly established, and its branches reach the heavens). If the people of truth falter in their ways while advocating their cause, the potential for the growth of the *Kalima Tayyiba* (the good word) diminishes. This situation isn't new for Muslims in our nation. Since gaining independence, they have been burdened with multiple imposed identities and addressed by names they couldn't bear or deserve. Muslims in partitioned India faced only deceit. As my father spoke, his face showed pain. Changing his tone, he said that this deception affected both sides, here and across the border. Pakistan emerged from the whirlwind of ideologies, emotions, and passions, like a divine whisper of an Islamic utopia. Jinnah, the stoic statesman and architect of this dream, would later baffle the masses with a change in tone so swift it left them reeling.

In the murky waters before Pakistan's birth, Jinnah addressed the Constituent Assembly, his words carving a path towards a more secular vision. His philosophy, so unexpected, that being Hindu or Muslim was but a mere detail of individual lives, leaving the state untouched by religion's firm grip. This sudden shift, as if the dream had been shattered, left many breathless, wondering what it all meant.
The question loomed, an insistent specter, why create Pakistan at all if it was not to be a haven for the Muslim identity? Could this not have been accomplished in the tapestry of united India? Jinnah's unexpected words pierced the balloon of slogans that once bolstered the Pakistan Movement, like "What is the meaning of Pakistan? There is no God but Allah."
As India's Muslim community gazed upon the unfolding of Pakistan, they found themselves caught in a dilemma. Tied together in the public's perception, Islam and Pakistan were two faces of a single, enigmatic coin.

In the wake of Partition, Indian Muslims found themselves grappling with an inescapable quandary: how could they prove their unwavering loyalty to India while distancing themselves from Pakistan, a nation born out of the idea of an Islamic state? It was as if they were branded criminals overnight, even those unconnected to the Muslim League movement. This forced them into a tenuous dance of walking the tightrope between expressing their identity and standing opposed to Pakistan as a strategic political move.

The pressure birthed a new category of nationalist Muslims, individuals obliged to lace their advocacy for rights or protest with a sprinkling of criticism or even hostility towards Pakistan. The underlying goal: to dispel any lingering suspicion of anti-national sentiment. But this identity of a nationalist Muslim was a heavy cloak, draped over them without consent or choice. It was a borrowed disguise, a shield worn by many prominent Muslim figures in the chaotic aftermath of Partition.

Their lives uprooted, they could do little else. The ground beneath their feet had shifted, leaving them in a strange and uncharted landscape.

Imagine, if you will, the bewildering turmoil that engulfed the Raja of Mahmudabad. As a revered secretary of the Muslim League and deemed as the very extension of Jinnah's arm, he could scarcely conceive of a day when he would find himself estranged in his own homeland. Confronted with this unforeseen and perplexing reality, he hastily withdrew his membership from the Muslim League. With a tinge of lamentation, he confessed to the public that his party had made a grave strategic miscalculation. In the face of this disorienting new landscape, he implored Indian Muslims to unwaveringly align with India in times of war, even if it necessitated raising their swords against Pakistan. And then, there was M.A. Salam, a distinguished leader of the Muslim League within the Madras Provincial Assembly. He, too, ardently professed his fealty, affirming that the Muslims of Andhra stood steadfastly loyal to the Indian state, willing to spill every last drop of their blood in its defense.

And what about those who had been woven into the tapestry of Congress or those who found themselves unanchored from the tides of the Muslim League? Were they compelled to seek solace beneath the expansive wings of nationalist Muslims?

In the labyrinth of the newborn India, it seemed that the lone sanctuary available to any Muslim, no matter the fabric of their origin or allegiance, was to persistently exhibit the colors of their nationalist spirit. This crucible was not without its tribulations for Muslims; I remember that a few moons before independence, when Gandhi Ji softly whispered the responsibility of national and provincial states to dance in unison with Muslims, embracing fairness and harmony, there arose a cacophony in the Hindu press. The murmurs among the press suggested that while they could ponder such a melody for nationalist Muslims, to elevate ordinary Muslims to that pedestal would be to court a dangerous dance with fate. These individuals, with hearts overflowing with affection for Pakistan and footsteps intertwined with the Muslim League movement, could not be expected to reshape their allegiances as swiftly as the night turns to day.

Was this pervasive sentiment sweeping the nation, or were the zealous Hindu movements the driving force behind this notion? My father explained with an intensity in his eyes: Even ostensibly moderate Hindu leaders couldn't escape the undercurrent of sectarianism that surged around them. You must have come across the name Ram Manohar Lohia.

Indeed, his reputation as a socialist leader is held in high regard within secular circles.

My father's voice grew animated as he continued: You'd be astonished that even influential figures like Lohia found themselves, post-partition—probably in a charged meeting around October 1947—rallying people against Pakistan. Their words dripped with fervor, "I especially implore the Indian Muslims to relinquish their weapons, wholeheartedly embrace their role as steadfast citizens of India, and, should the need arise, steel themselves for war against Pakistan or any other nation." To leaf through the newspapers of September and October 1947 is to delve into a vivid tableau of that tumultuous time.

One notable individual was Govind Vallabh Pant, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh at the time. He too, shared the same lofty expectation from Indian Muslims: that they pledge their undying loyalty to the country. With an unflinching candor, he declared that every Muslim in India must be prepared to stand their ground against the encroaching forces from Pakistan, ready to lay down their lives as the ultimate tribute. He beseeched them to plumb the depths of their hearts and make a resolute decision, once and for all, on whether they truly desired to migrate to Pakistan or not.

The situation was unmistakably marked by a passionate outcry, as if a whirlwind of emotion had erupted. What could have kindled such a fierce storm of animosity towards Muslims? It feels like only yesterday when Hindus and Muslims had forged a harmonious alliance during the Khilafat movement, with Muslims proudly holding significant positions of leadership. Yet, somehow, as the 1940s dawned, the circumstances for Muslims had shifted so drastically that they found themselves burdened by the need to prove their loyalty, forced into adopting a nationalist identity that conflicted with their religious and ethnic core.

As I posed this question to my father, he paused, lost in thought for a moment, as if sifting through the annals of history to unveil the truth of the matter. He began to explain, "You see, what we perceive as freedom was, for many Hindu leaders, a grand resurgence of ancient India. This vision was not exclusive to revivalist Hindus; even the luminaries of the Congress secretly entertained the notion of it signifying the end of a thousand years of Muslim rule. There was a gentleman, Babu Sampurnanand, who occupied the esteemed position of Minister of Education in the Congress government of Uttar Pradesh. In the weeks leading up to that pivotal moment of independence, he penned a newspaper article, sharing his thoughts on how ancient India had also been a complex mosaic of small states. While we mourn the secession of Pakistan, we simultaneously rejoice in the glorious prize of freedom—a treasure we had relinquished a millennium ago. Sampurnanand elucidated that India's sense of self had been lost in the Battle of Thanesar, when Prithvi Raj succumbed

to Mahmud Ghori's might. From that point forward, our land was devoid of progress in science or philosophy, bereft of any significant breakthroughs during those thousand years. Countless narratives like this can be found in the newspapers and journals of that era. If you ever have the chance, visit the library in Aligarh and delve into the ancient archives of newspapers and journals. There, you will discover the formidable challenges and tribulations that the dawn of freedom cast upon the Muslims of this country. Many individuals, who initially lacked any intellectual or ideological bond with the Pakistan Movement, eventually acknowledged the difficulty of life in a divided India and embarked on the journey to Pakistan. They vowed that the remainder of their days would be dedicated to proving their unwavering loyalty and devotion as true citizens of their new nation."

The conversation was still ongoing when a rickshaw stopped in front of the bookshop. "Help them get off," Abba asked me. It turned out to be one of my father's old friends, a professor of mathematics at the local college. Seeing him with a walking stick in hand today was quite a shock. The lively spirit that once adorned Zaki Sahib's face was now absent. Seeing me, his face lit up with delight. Knowing that the issue of Muslim identity was being discussed before his arrival, he let out a cold sigh. He said, "They devised many schemes to obscure our true identity. Sometimes they said we were a minority, and our place was on the sidelines. Although ideologically speaking, we still held the status of the majority, an artificial majority was crafted against us, and it was called the Hindu majority, even though being a Hindu was neither an ideology nor a religion. It was a general term used by the Arabs and Persians for the inhabitants of this region, regardless of their religion or nationality. The truth was that there were different and conflicting sects of various religions and believers of different deities here. The eternal divisions of caste and creed had made these sects hostile and antagonistic towards one another. To cover up this detestable situation, an artificial concept of Hinduism was created, and in this artificial landscape, despite being the largest community, Muslims were declared a minority."

As Zaki Sahib continued, he took off his glasses, requested a glass of water, and after a brief pause, he said, "There is something called a forced identity, meaning something people impose upon you, making you believe that you are a certain way, even when you are not. I call such adversarial impositions 'Identity by Coercion.' Muslims in this country were called a minority, and it was said so repeatedly that many Muslims became convinced that they were indeed a minority. They themselves began to call and consider themselves a minority."

"The ingenious use of the term 'coercion' adds a certain depth to the conversation," Abdul Mateen Sahib chimed in. He observed, "It truly captures the essence of identity by coercion, doesn't it?"

Zaki Sahib continued to weave his narrative. He mused, "Can you fathom the profound sense of powerlessness one feels when forced to accept a belief about oneself that simply isn't true? Even in the days of the British rule, we had an artificial identity foisted upon us. They labeled us Mohammedans, yet we fiercely rejected that imposed identity. To this day, we are known as Muslims, but the label of minority clings to us like a stubborn stain. So much so that we now, of our own volition, seek concessions from the government under the pretense of this minority status."

I hadn't quite realized the monumental role identity plays in the lives of nations. Time and again, I'd heard Abba say, "You become what you think," but understanding the magnitude of how one's self-perception shapes both individual and collective existence proved to be a more complex endeavor than I'd anticipated.

27
An All-Day Banquet

Today was a Friday, yet the spirited bustle that typically filled the bookshop was strangely missing. Shahma Chacha's rickshaw never came, and Allama Khorish didn't make an appearance to order his usual meal. The news of Nawab Paigambarpur's passing had reached us just a few days prior, revealing that he had died in abject poverty. In his final days, my father had tasked my brother with keeping an eye on him—none of us could have guessed that the once-affluent aristocrat would become a cautionary tale for the impoverished.

On one fateful day, the professor found himself submerged in an ocean of distress. Abandoning his half-eaten plate of pilau, he was drawn toward the Grand Mosque, where he had been known to spend nights in deep worship. Two years have elapsed since his sudden vanishing act, and the truth of his fate remains shrouded in mystery—did the earth swallow him whole or did the sky sweep him up in a tender embrace? The news of the professor's abrupt departure stirred memories of the esteemed writer and scholar, Anwar Ali Khan Soz, who was revered for his candid writings on Muslim issues in the English language. Those who knew him well whispered that a tormented soul resided within him. Who could better grasp the tribulations that had befallen and continued to afflict Indian Muslims than a man like him? Rumor has it that one day, he too stepped out of his home, never to be seen again. Family, friends, and loved ones scoured every nook and cranny of Delhi, but he remained elusive. Perhaps destiny had finally granted him mercy, for this country was no longer a sanctuary for restless spirits like his.

The bookshop had evolved into a haven for a new generation of fervent young minds, eager to explore the enigmatic future and dissect the complex tapestry of history. These spirited youth, fueled by an insatiable curiosity, found themselves contemplating a multitude of questions. As the Muslims of North India were cognizant that regions such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh would remain within India's borders

even after Pakistan's inception, what ignited their support for the Muslim League? Recognizing that they could not forsake their homes to migrate to Pakistan, why didn't they confront the partition's ill-conceived blueprint? Did the partition scheme dwell within the realm of conspiracy, or was it an earnest aspiration harbored by the Muslim League's leadership?

One day, Abdul Moeiz, with an air of fascination, inquired whether he had heard that the concept of Pakistan was merely a bargaining chip. Jinnah's objective, wielding this formidable threat, was to wrest as many concessions as possible from the unyielding grasp of the Congress leadership.

By 1940, the unfolding situation seemed much like a vehement outcry, my father elucidated. In the Lahore Resolution, which later earned the moniker of the Pakistan Resolution, the notion of autonomous Muslim-majority states surfaced, rather than a separate country. Iqbal's thoughts, too, toyed with the establishment of Muslim cultural zones instead of dividing the nation. After all, India had forever been a tapestry of diverse cultural regions, so having such cultural zones within a singular political unity was not atypical. However, post-1946, circumstances morphed with such velocity that maintaining control became an unattainable feat.

"Did Pakistan inadvertently emerge into existence?" I queried, attempting to fathom the vastness of the transpired events.

"It's an arduous task to assert definitively," he responded. "The crux of the struggle revolved around the aspiration of Muslims to safeguard their cultural centers within a flexible federation, whilst the Congress party envisioned governing the nation through a formidable central government. The culmination of this struggle materialized as an unnatural solution—an unprecedented frenzy in human chronicles." He paused, his eyes brimming with sorrow. "Upon this earth, Radcliffe etched a line that, with its insatiable bloodlust, engulfed millions of souls. An entire civilization was left ravaged."

If this hadn't come to pass, imagine the splendor of Delhi and Lucknow. The countless opportunities for intellectual and literary

growth that would have blossomed in Hyderabad and Bhopal. Abdul Moeiz tried to glimpse a fragment of the vanished future through the eyes of his imagination.

He continued, "Indeed, it all transpired suddenly, but the currents of change had been flowing in this direction for a while. For an extended period, Muslims were living in a fantastical world. Even after the partition, they failed to steady themselves, to regain their balance. Time and time again, they faced assaults that they couldn't withstand. In a systematic manner, laws were enacted with the singular purpose of stripping Muslims of their properties."

"Is that so?"

"Absolutely, like the Evacuees Property Act and the Enemy Property Act."

"And didn't Muslim political leaders protest these circumstances?" I questioned, my heart heavy.

"What could they possibly have done?" he sighed. "Sardar Patel controlled this relentless campaign. Influential ministers such as Panth, Khar, and Shukla were tireless in their efforts to back Muslims into a corner, using every means within their grasp. But that's merely one aspect of the complex situation. Muslims themselves grappled with understanding how to navigate this ever-changing landscape. The obliteration of the landlord system left them reeling, plunging them from the heavens to the unforgiving ground in the blink of an eye. Unemployment pervaded the Muslim community, and their once-steady sources of income crumbled to dust. The once-majestic Nawabs of Lucknow clung to life on the pensions bestowed upon them by the British, but eventually, the cruel jaws of bankruptcy and destitution snapped shut.

"What were these pensions?" I queried, curious and disheartened.

"Consider them temporary unemployment lifelines," he elucidated, sorrow tinging his words. "When all other income sources evaporated, these Nawabs turned desperately to borrowing from Hindu moneylenders. Entangled in the merciless web of these predatory loans, their grand mansions and palaces were lost to the insatiable grasp of the moneylenders."

"If only they had managed their remaining estates more judiciously, perhaps Muslims would still have a significant presence in the heart of Lucknow today," he lamented, the weight of history pressing down upon us.

Times had changed, yet in their hearts, these people were still wedded to a bygone era, their former grandeur haunting them like an unshakeable ghost. They were averse to the concept of work, to the idea of embracing new ways to sustain themselves. Their pride stood as an impenetrable barrier, preventing them from seeing the potential in selling their assets or repurposing their estates. The thought of becoming fodder for the gossip of the town, their names whispered with scorn, made them bristle with indignation. Oh, how the mighty had fallen!

Take, for instance, our dear friend, Nawab Bariol, a man who once reveled in his opulence. Even as the world around him evolved, his mind remained trapped in a past brimming with pomp and ceremony. As firewood in his kitchen dwindled, he ordered his cherished furniture to be chopped up for kindling, too proud to accept that a single piece of his ornate belongings could fetch him a cartload of wood. But such was the stubbornness of Nawab Bariol.

In the days of yore, Muharram was a time of spirited community bonding. Nawab Barioli, nostalgic for those days, would distribute sherbet from his stall, throwing sacks of sugar into wells as a gesture of goodwill. Well-meaning folks tried to explain to him that such practices were relics of the past, that large steel containers could accomplish the task more efficiently and with a touch of modern elegance. But his ears were deaf to reason.

For Nawab Bariol, tradition triumphed over progress. Announcing the start of Ramadan and Eid with the thunderous boom of a cannon was the only way to display Islamic pride. When urged to adopt the modern alternative of a siren, he held steadfast to the belief that the prestige of the old ways could not be replicated. In a rapidly changing world, the Nawab's obstinate adherence to tradition was but a poignant reminder of the dying embers of a once-glorious past.

At the tender age of nine or ten, I found myself caught in a time capsule at my maternal grandparents' house, enveloped by remnants of grandeur and old-world charm. Though the feudal landholding system had vanished, my grandfather had managed to weave a web of connections to preserve his estate. He still held land that felt like a miniature realm where wanderlust, exploration, and hunting could thrive.

Twice weekly, village markets sprang to life, disputes were settled, and seekers of justice flocked to the courtyard, hoping for solutions. My grandfather had assumed the role of a local headman, but the question remained: how long could this artifice last? The villagers now understood that their relationship had evolved beyond that of ruler and subjects. Rebellion simmered in their hearts, and pride glistened in their eyes, though only a few dared to express these feelings openly.

An air of nonchalance, perhaps a deliberate ignorance, seemed to hang heavy over the estate. They clung to the pastimes of their halcyon days, going hunting and reveling in the liberty of doing whatever they pleased within their estate, with no need for accountability.

This longing for the days of power and luxury persisted, even as the world raced forward, leaving the old ways to slowly disintegrate into the sands of time.

My grandfather, a connoisseur of the finer things in life, would indulge in lavish feasts of delectable dishes. At first, the grandeur of the banquet eluded me, with an array of plates prepared from dawn till dusk. The table would be adorned with delicate glass bowls filled to the brim with an assortment of pickles, jams, and chutneys.

He ate merely twice a day, consuming modest portions, yet his desire to maintain the rich culinary tradition was unwavering. For him, the sumptuous meals were a matter of pride and a symbol of his standing within the community. It was his way of clinging to the echoes of a fading past while the world continued to shift around him, celebrating the nuances of life through the language of food.

In addition to his penchant for grand feasts, grandfather harbored a deep longing for an expansive family. After the untimely demise of his

first wife, he found love once again, and during a wedding ceremony, he was captivated by yet another striking beauty. The customs of old dictated that he should welcome her into his harem, as well. It is said that a Hadith even suggests a believer should pray for increase in his progeny. Within the household, aunts, uncles, and numerous devoted servants formed a bustling ensemble. The laughter of young girls conjured an everlasting air of festivity. These servants had unique and evocative names like Gulbadan, Chandni, Khushbu, and Rasila.

Bearing witness to their lives day and night, one could hardly believe that the world outside had undergone a metamorphosis. Nana made valiant attempts to veil the reality of his waning circumstances, but alas, his heart couldn't withstand the weight of his crumbling stature and pride, and a heart attack ultimately sealed his fate. In the wake of Nana's passing, the elder uncles did their utmost to maintain the family's fading glory, but they were more in tune with the winds of change than Nana had been. They knew deep down that they were grappling with a lost cause. Eventually, the strain overwhelmed them, and after their departure, only the younger generation remained.

These new torchbearers lacked any connection to the once grand lineage or the intoxicating allure of their noble ancestry. Some reconciled with their newfound ordinariness, while others, with hearts burdened by despair, embarked on a quest for employment in distant Gulf countries. Even now, as the imagery of grand feasts flickers before my eyes, the laughter of young girls reverberates in my ears, and grandfather's hunting exploits in his prime emerge in my memory, it all seems like an ethereal dream. Who could have predicted that a mere few years after the partition of India, the grandiosity and prestige of Indian Muslims would fade into the ephemeral realm of dreams?

In our neighborhood, there lived a man—a refugee from a city in western Uttar Pradesh—whose once-luxurious life had dissipated like a fleeting dream. Out of compassion, someone suggested he open a shoe store to earn an honest and halal livelihood. But he scoffed at the idea, unable to envision himself fitting shoes on those who had once saluted him. He possessed some experience in the delicate art of dentistry, yet

even that profession clashed with his aristocratic demeanor back in his hometown. So, propelled by fate, he embarked on a journey that led him to a remote city in Bihar, leaving everything behind. There, he found solace in knowing that no one would dare speak in his presence without his express permission.

The inescapable truth is that Muslims in our land had failed to cherish the political influence they had been granted. They operated under the delusion that this state of affairs would endure indefinitely. Mother Nature whispered her warnings, yet they fell on deaf ears," my father explained, gazing into Abdul Moeiz's wide and searching eyes. "Even after the cataclysmic fall of Delhi in 1857, the lesson remained unlearned. Muslim aristocrats and landowners clung to their documents and deeds from the British, believing they had salvaged their hollow pride and could prolong their freeloading lives just a bit longer."

"From 1857 to 1947, there were 90 years; Muslims could have orchestrated a myriad of plans and made significant progress during this time," Abdul Moeiz murmured, his voice tinged with regret.

But how could they reconcile with such a bitter truth? Even after the partition, when the official abolishment of the landlord system came to pass in 1951, minor landlords and landowners persisted in upholding their pristine facades instead of facing the new reality head-on. They had grown so entrenched in a culture of adulation that managing their own estates seemed like an insurmountable challenge. You may have heard the stories of a snake appearing at Nawab Sahib's residence, causing him to panic and summon a servant to find a man to handle the situation. The servant, perhaps mischievously, reminded Nawab Sahib: "But Your Highness, are you not a man yourself?" Upon hearing this, Nawab Sahib's sense of self snapped back into focus. He said, "Ah, yes, you have timely jogged my memory. Fetch me my stick and let us see where my shoe has gone." But by the time Nawab Sahib mustered the courage to act, the snake had long vanished down the drain.

'How peculiar they were!' Abdul Moeiz could no longer contain his laughter.

Abba recounted another captivating story from his youth, unsure of its veracity but acknowledging its reflection of social issues of that time. The tale involved a Nawab and his wife, who sought medical attention from a doctor, Hakeem Sahab. He requested urine samples from both for examination, but the bottles were accidentally mixed. The Nawab, bedridden and in pain, trusted Hakeem Sahab implicitly. So, when the doctor identified signs of pregnancy in one of the samples, the Nawab was dumbfounded.

'Indeed, what strange people they were!' Abdul Moeiz struggled to stifle his laughter. He observed, 'Their mindset was so traditional. My father always said that blind imitation dulls the intellect.' Even within this humorous story, Abdul Moeiz managed to emphasize the superiority of his Ahl-e-Hadith sect.

Abba added that imitation, in religion or politics, could make one feel trapped in a dead end. However, it wasn't just the inflexible-minded imitators who suffered from this issue; those who considered themselves non-imitators, like the Ahle-e-Hadith, also faced similar situations.

'Inflexible-minded? What does that mean? I've never heard that term before.'

Abba explained that, like rubber returning to its original state no matter how much it's stretched, some people remain firmly attached to their previous positions despite countless explanations and arguments. They're unwilling to abandon their ancestors' path. He then shared a humorous story about the non-imitators' imitation approach. A man, an expert in the field of Hadith, was skilled in scrutinizing narrators and their biographical details. One day, he wept inconsolably. His students inquired about the cause of his grief. He sobbed, 'Oh, what can I tell you? I am devastated. My wife has lost her husband; she has become a widow.' The students tried to console him, reminding him that he was alive by God's grace, and his wife couldn't be a widow with him still living. For a moment, he seemed to understand before resuming his tears, explaining that the person who had given him this news was a trustworthy narrator and couldn't possibly lie.

Abdul Moeiz appeared to have grasped the underlying message. He mused, 'By Allah, it is a baffling situation; if you ponder it, you can hear the echo of "wajadna aaba'na kazalik yafaloon" (But we found our fathers doing thus) emanating from every corner.'

Indeed, this conversation has taken a detour. The essential point to understand is that if the British managed to traverse the seven seas and seize control of our destinies, the root cause resided within us. We had long lost the ability to step beyond our limited perspectives. In the face of emerging challenges, our responses remained anchored in the past. Our venerable scholars and leaders became disconnected from the real world, searching for answers to modern questions within the dusty pages of ancient fatwas. When Shah Waliullah translated the Holy Quran, the majority recoiled in shock; Shah Abdul Aziz introduced the subject of interest prohibition in British India, examining and scrutinizing it, but the discourse failed to progress.
"However, those people were part of the traditional imitators' (muqalledeen) camp, even leading the charge," Abdul Moeiz inquired with a hint of perplexity in his voice.
Exactly! You have comprehended the matter correctly. Yet, people remained obstinate in their refusal to deviate even slightly from their constrained views. They had long been entrapped by the practice of absolute imitation (taqleed mutlaq). A rigid mindset had inscribed itself into their fate. As a result, they were unable to decipher the writing on the wall. Despite the subtle and incremental changes occurring around them, they continued to dwell within a self-constructed, illusory world.

"It seemed as if they were engulfed by a postmodern reality," I shared with Abdul Moeiz, attempting to showcase my academic insight.
Abba paid no attention to my input, perhaps eager to explore the heart of the matter. He explained, "When this rigid mindset infiltrates religious life, it gives birth to a mechanistic form of devotion, devoid of the essence of worship. The sole focus remains on amassing personal rewards. We overlook how the rights of common people are being trampled by our own actions. One reason the British, who arrived

from afar and seized control of our affairs, succeeded was due to the moral decay our society had suffered at the hands of conventional and mechanistic religiosity. On one hand, there were festivities of Urs, the rituals of Rajab, feasts in honor of revered saints, and the clamor of Muharram mourning, which lent a facade of vibrancy to religious life. On the other hand, brothels prospered alongside these practices, esteemed as a cultural emblem within the elite circles. Connoisseurs of music, dance, and poetry did not perceive their presence as a blemish.
He further recounted: "Once, my late father sent me on a journey with one of his landlord friends. In those days, I was studying in Madhubani and was home for the holidays. En route, we halted at a palatial building that provided all the amenities one could expect in a wealthy man's mansion at that time. We rested for a while and then, reinvigorated, continued towards our next destination. Later, I discovered that the place we had stayed was, in fact, the residence of a courtesan named Munni Bai. When my father learned of this, he was livid with his friend. He did not want his children to be exposed to such hubs of arts and corruption."

In "Behishti Zewar," Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi recounted the story of a virtuous lady from Lucknow whose husband would habitually spend his days and nights at the brothel. Instead of protesting against this situation, she demonstrated patience and gratitude, and even sent home-cooked meals to the brothel, earning a great reputation among the people. Abdul Moeiz provided another testimony drawing from his knowledge. He said, "Son, that was the general mindset of the time. There was a wedding in one of our close family circles. The groom's uncle became upset over something. In those days, it was customary for weddings to involve sulking and pacifying. When the matter escalated and his displeasure took a delicate turn, the bride's father himself brought a glass of sherbet to serve him. However, being from the groom's side, the uncle wasn't going to be appeased so easily. He said, 'Sir, the matter has gone too far now. Sherbet alone won't suffice; there should also be provisions for some 'Shahwat', bodily pleasure along with it.' 'God forbid! What kind of people were they?' Abdul Moeiz expressed his astonishment. Abba continued, "The carefree

lifestyle of the landed gentry had given birth to many evils. In this environment, the mention of religion seemed out of place. We had a friend named Irtiza Husain, who passed away just last year. May God have mercy on him. There's a village named Chandan Patti in the outskirts of the city where a large Shia population resides; he was from there."

Parveen Shakir might have been from there too, right? It felt like something abruptly bubbled up in Abdul Muizz's memory, triggered by the mere mention of Chandni Patti. Abba mused, "Ah, yes. Her family was from there before they migrated to Karachi. Mr. Irtiza was a gentle soul, brimming with compassion, his heart set ablaze by a thirst for knowledge. I recall one day he said, 'Hafiz Sahib, it's the eighth day of Muharram. Each day, I find myself among the assembly, listening to the heart-wrenching tribulations of the Ahl-e-Bait. Yet, my heart remains untouched, unshaken. It's a cruel fate, as if the fountain of tears has run dry within me. Can you imagine, witnessing the orators perched upon their pulpits, their speeches resembling hollow, mechanical performances? I see them as merchants, peddling the blood of Hussain. Their true natures would astound you—eloquent, refined facades on the pulpit, only to devolve into common, even vulgar, language as soon as they descend. How could tears ever fall, when our ears are filled with the elegies of these chameleons?'
He sighed, 'It seems the moral fabric of the Shia community frayed, much like our own.' Their situation was worse, their sorrow a notch more profound. The nawabs of Lucknow, predominantly Shia, wielded undue power over language, literature, and culture. 'They were known to bind the wings of nightingales with the tender veins of roses,' Abdul Muizz quipped.
Yes, you grasped the truth of it. A life overflowing with empty formalities and saturated with pretense had driven them away from the realm of genuine existence. The Land Reforms Act of 1951 severed their economic arteries. They failed to even restructure their priceless urban assets. The tragic irony lay in their downfall, prey to the very politics of the moneylenders they once sold their cherished mansions to, or mortgaged their properties with.

Okay! So, how did this all come about? He shared, "You'd be stunned to know that Lucknow is the sole city in India where Hindu-Muslim conflicts are virtually nonexistent, and instead, you find intra-sect disputes among Muslims." "What do you mean?" He explained, "Shia and Sunni Muslims fight with such ferocity that outsiders don't even feel the need to interfere. In reality, we're grappling with setbacks both internally and externally. On one hand, we have Hindu revivalists who see independence as the resurgence of Vedic India, rendering our existence despicable. On the other hand, we've made ample room for mutual rivalries and sectarian disputes."

"Were the Shia-Sunni rivalries not so evident before independence?" I inquired. He replied, "Oh, rivalries existed, but akin to the Barelvi-Deobandi conflicts of today. No sense of distinctiveness permeated the atmosphere. Intra-sect marriages were common, and both sects backed one another in matters of national interest. Consider your university as an example. Sir Syed enjoyed the wholehearted cooperation of his Shia friends, encompassing not just Twelver Shias but also Aga Khani and Bohra Shias. The situation in Lucknow took a turn for the worse in the 1960s when Jan Sangh's politics infiltrated the Shia-Sunni discord."

"Jan Sangh's?" He continued, "Absolutely! This is yet another poignant facet of our internal strife. Those non-Muslim merchants, who had acquired properties from Shia Nawabs and were indebted to them, now dabbled in Jan Sangh's politics. Lucknow, politically perceived as a Congress bastion, was a place where Sunnis paraded in praise of the Sahaba and Shias condemned the first three caliphs. An underlying spark had been ignited; Singh's intervention transformed it into an all-consuming flame. Singh extended his support to the Shias against the Sunnis, and in return, the Shias cast their consolidated votes in his favor. As a result, Jan Sangh seized all four assembly seats in Lucknow during the 1967 provincial elections. From then on, Shia-Sunni strife became the norm during elections, regardless of their scale. However, in recent years, the Janata Party government has imposed restrictions on contentious processions from both sects, bringing about some much-needed respite."

Abba's words continued to flow, when the melodic call to prayer drifted from the central mosque. "Now, make ready for the prayer; these dialogues shall persist," he expressed, rising to his feet, and thus the gathering dispersed.

This day, as fate would have it, en route to the mosque, Dr. Kokab Qadr Mirza unexpectedly crossed the mind. Kokab Sahib was indeed a professor within the realm of Urdu, yet his true claim to fame lay in his connection to the last ruler of Awadh, the great Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, of whom he was a great-grandson. When a humble soul dared to say, "Sir, we are but your subjects," a dreamlike aura would emerge upon his visage, as though the past had materialized before his very eyes. All his scholarly pursuits and wondrous findings centered around his illustrious lineage. One could only imagine the contrasting lives - the affluence of the teacher in Aligarh compared to the lavishness of Awadh. Oh, how his heart must have ached, beholding the dazzling palaces of Lucknow shimmering within his gaze.

The Nawab, after his dethronement, spent 31 more years upon this earth. During these days, he indulged his noble tastes: dance and music, poetry and song, and the unfulfilled longing for otherworldly beauties. Many thumris and raag bheiravi were crafted by his hand. His enchanting melody, "Babul Mora Naiyhar Chhooto Hi Jaaye," continues to captivate the ears of listeners to this very day. Alas, he could not devise a remedy for the changed landscape of life, not even through the expression of verse or melody. It seemed as though an unseen voice continually whispered to him, "Thou art still the ruler of Awadh, albeit dethroned, yet the keeper of former splendors." As legends whisper, when he was exiled from his beloved Awadh, a procession of a thousand cooks accompanied him. The British Crown bestowed upon him a pension of twelve lakh rupees. And there, within Matiya Bridge of Calcutta, where he spent his twilight days, a small corner of Lucknow was recreated by his hands. His progeny, alas, remained entrapped by the ghosts of their past, echoes of their ancestors' grandeur reverberating within their very souls. In this way, paranoia or delusions of grandeur enveloped their fates.

In such psychological dispositions, a soul's connection to the material world is significantly sundered. They glimpse the zenith of their existence in distant memories, convinced that the days of splendor are behind them and what lies ahead is but the drudgery of life. In the lives of nations, this affliction is known as the entrapment within the bygone days.

As we embark on a new chapter of our lives, we must find within ourselves the audacity to dream of our grandeur reaching its peak in the future, rather than lamenting what's buried in the past. Phrases such as "lost glory" serve only to enshrine a mindset rooted in defeat, making us feel as if we've been reduced to mere empty casings from the very start.

28
Shadows Dancing in the Strangers' Dusk

The dawn of a new academic year had broken, yet a sense of melancholy lingered. I found myself lamenting the absence of cherished friends who once accompanied me on our shared journey through Tajdeed magazine and our participation in the literary and cultural pursuits of the Writers Forum. The winds of change had swept them along different paths. Shahid Pervez and Adil Mahmood had set their sights on the world of commerce, while Qamar Abbas and Aale Ali were not immersed in the study of English literature. Haleem Bhai remained an enigma, forever lost in his own world of ecstasy, his path uncertain and unknown.

One day, the hostel attendant bestowed upon me a large, khaki envelope. He said it was left for me by a friend during the holidays and he had placed it safely in the cupboard, only for it to slip his mind. With bated breath, I peeled open the envelope, revealing an exquisite, delicate brass paper cutter within. This small, sword-shaped treasure bore the engraved Quranic verse, "Allam al-Insan ma lam ya'lam." Accompanying this enchanting artifact was a slim notebook, its first page tenderly adorned with a brief, attached note. And so it read:

> ‘’Dearest friend, greetings and blessings. I'm uncertain when we will meet again or where life's journey may take us. Currently, my primary responsibility is caring for my mother. She hasn't been the same since my brother's passing. Gout has taken a toll on her, causing great suffering. But the most significant challenge she faces is her inability to forget the tragic events of August 13th. She spends her days and nights in tears. If only we had the power to forget, but our mission is not to erase memories but to remind others, so that future generations can avert such atrocities.
>
> Upon your encouragement, I've attempted to write on numerous occasions, but my thoughts fail to align. If possible, please make any necessary revisions to this manuscript. The

goal is to have it published consistently. Maybe at some point, I'll visit Aligarh. Until then, take care.
Abdul Haleem Siddiqui"

As I read the line, a surge of emotion welled up within me. I couldn't help but wonder about poor Haleem Bhai and the circumstances he might be facing. His educational journey had once again found itself in the midst of crisis. To console myself, I clung to the possibility that he would return soon, and an opportunity for us to meet would arise. I turned the notebook over. Written with a charred pen were the words: "Sham-e-Ghareeban, August 13, 1980." I deduced it to be a personal journal or diary. Fascinating symbols adorned the margins in red ink. In one instance, an arrow pointed upward on an empty triangle, while in another, 'Documents Available' was inscribed within an oval circle. Elsewhere, the phrase 'Attention Required' appeared, and above certain recorded dates, a small depiction of Zulfiqar's peak was visible. At the end of the writing, a cryptic clue was nestled among various numbers, accompanied by the words 'sayanjali, sayanjali.'

Up until this point, the method of editing Haleem Bhai's writings consisted of him reading aloud as I listened intently, occasionally interjecting to provide guidance or make subtle alterations in the sentence structure. Now, having the chance to closely examine his notebook and observe these intricate patterns and symbols, I realized that he had been traversing a multitude of avenues in an effort to uplift his heavy heart. The journal began with something along the lines of:

Aligarh, September 5, 1980
Today is the seventh day of my fever. Dr. Jigar's red and yellow pills have drained the life out of me. It feels as if the building of life within me has crumbled to the ground. I wish suicide were easy. The mere thought of my mother makes my heart tremble. Sometimes, I think I should stay alive so that I can put my sorrowful story into words. People should know what is happening to Muslims in this country. With this thought in mind, I have started writing this diary. Holding

onto the trust of pain is not everyone's cup of tea. May God grant me the strength.

Delhi, September 11, 1980

Today, I participated in a meeting of the Muslim Consultative Council, held in a children's home. Originally intended for the executive committee, the gathering also included students from Aligarh. As an eyewitness to the Eidgah massacre, I had hoped for a chance to share my experience, but the atmosphere was chaotic and muddled, with no one truly listening to anyone else. This was my first time witnessing the prominent leaders of the Ummah engaged in a consultation.

Among those present were Mufti Atiqur Rahman, president of the Majlis Mashawart, Maulana Ali Miyan Nadwi, Maulana Minntaullah Rahmani, Maulana Mohammad Yusuf of Jamaat-e-Islami, Ibrahim Suleiman Seth, Syed Shahabuddin, Zulfiqarullah of the Muslim Majlis, and many others. As the adage goes, where there are two clerics, there will be at least three opinions on every issue, and this meeting was no exception.

The situation soured when it became clear that our leaders hesitated to adopt a firm stance. Eventually, they agreed to send a delegation to Moradabad, but without specifying when. It appeared that our leaders were in no rush to address the issue, even though the meeting occurred a month after the massacre. It seemed they lacked a solid plan, as if they had gathered merely to recite prayers for the martyrs of Moradabad.

In retrospect, I regret attending the meeting. Had I not, I would have retained a more idealistic view of my national leaders. Instead, the experience left me feeling profoundly disillusioned.

Having witnessed the inner workings of the Consultative Council, I became convinced of the truth behind a certain joke. The tale goes that once in a gathering of Iblis (the Devil), numerous demons were reporting on their activities aimed at disrupting the lives of those who believed themselves to be the bearers of the final message. Iblis inquired about their efforts to break the spirit of these people.

One demon, swelling with pride, stood up and proclaimed that they had orchestrated shootings on worshippers in Moradabad, decimated Muslim businesses, and shattered their morale. This would take years for them to recover. However, Iblis remained unimpressed by the report. Another demon chimed in, "Your Excellency, we have sown discord within Muslim educational institutions." Yet again, Iblis was not moved by this revelation.

A third demon boasted about suppressing intellectual thought and promoting conservatism in religious schools, but still, Iblis remained indifferent. He asked if anyone else had something to share. It was then that a modest-looking demon rose and said, "Your Excellency, I have laid the foundations for the Muslim Majlis Mashawarat and the Muslim Personnel Law Board. Consequently, these organizations perpetuate the old formula of two members and three opinions."
Upon hearing this, Iblis' face lit up with delight. He embraced the humble demon, declaring, "You have struck the perfect target. Now, these people will sit within these organizations, binding their own hands against their adversaries. They will demand an inquiry after every atrocity, never managing to reach a consensus on any decisive action."

Aligarh, September 13, 1980
Today, I returned from Delhi, with Moradabad still engulfed in flames. I spoke with my uncle over the phone, and he was utterly disheartened. Licenses for Muslim-owned factories are being revoked under the accusation of illegally manufacturing weapons within their premises. The police have seized a 0.32 bore pistol from a few impoverished Muslim homes, making it appear as if they are now preparing to frame Muslims for possessing illegal weapons. The notion of Muslims owning factories is almost laughable. Yes, there was a time when this was true, but now the majority of them are merely laborers. To call these places, where they allege weapons are being manufactured, "factories" is an exaggeration. What do these so-called factories actually contain? A small furnace for casting, an old bicycle rim, a handful of tools for bending and opening iron, some pliers and

wrenches, and a drilling machine. This is the entire equipment inventory of a Muslim factory where knives, revolvers, and pistols are supposedly being produced.
Some skilled craftsmen can create such convincing replicas of real pistols that they could be mistaken for the genuine article, yet they cost only a tenth of the price of the real thing. The government is not unaware of this information. In the past, courts have even suggested that these talented individuals be given appropriate work, allowing their abilities to be put to better use.
However, the government is determined to tarnish the reputation of Muslims. They do not want to let any opportunity to do so pass them by. They even go as far as blaming the Muslims themselves for the massacres committed against their own community.

Aligarh, September 16, 1980
Today, the newspaper "Qaumi Awaz" prominently featured a news report stating that a delegation of Muslim Majlis Mashawarat leaders met with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The manner in which the article is written creates an impression that this meeting is a significant achievement for our leaders. Dear leaders, be encouraged! Many more challenges like Moradabad lie ahead, and you will continue to have opportunities to meet with the Prime Minister. However, this meeting comes at a great cost. In exchange for the innocent blood of two and a half thousand Muslims and the devastation of an entire city, all you receive is this ill-fated audience with the Prime Minister. Isn't it peculiar?

Aligarh, September 18, 1980
Ultimately, the anticipated outcome has transpired. From the news, it is clear that this delegation, instead of genuinely representing the Muslim community, went to Moradabad under the directive and approval of the Prime Minister. The Moradabad district administration welcomed the delegation and provided accommodations in a government guest house. The Commissioner and DIG introduced the 19-member delegation to both Muslim and non-Muslim residents of the city.

The delegation arrived at eleven in the morning and felt compelled to leave the city before dusk. They were apprehensive that staying overnight could pose a risk. It appears that embracing danger is no longer a common practice among leaders. Nevertheless, the necessary formalities have been completed. The Muslims of Moradabad can now be left to their own devices. Both the gardener and the hunter are satisfied.

Aligarh, September 25, 1980
Today, I had another conversation with my uncle. Muslims are confronted with a new calamity. The government is gathering information about Muslims: the extent of people's losses, the locations of small home-based factories, the number of people of various ages employed in them, and the number of young individuals aged 16 to 30. There are other similar questions as well. Some believe the government may be intending to offer some form of assistance package, while others fear that if the purpose was to help, why compile a list of our youth? The release of these young people, who were taken from their homes following the massacre, has yet to be achieved. We are uncertain about what these individuals want.

Police continue to search houses, detaining whoever they please. No one dares to resist. Those who have resisted are either dead or imprisoned. Now, the prevailing custom is to live in fear and under constant stress. As a woman protested while her husband was being taken away by the police, an officer forcefully snatched her two-year-old child from her lap and hurled him into the air. It is said that the child has been in a coma ever since. The hapless woman is torn between tending to her child or her husband, feeling utterly powerless. If only our leaders could witness this situation with their own eyes. We are left wondering whom God has entrusted us to. Our plight exists because we are Muslims, yet Islam is absent from our lives; how then can divine aid arrive? This perplexing dilemma leaves us questioning what unfolds on the divine stage.

The entire notebook was an emotional rollercoaster, filled with heart-wrenching entries that laid bare the soul's agony. On one page, the bitter pain of cruel treatment by our enemis screamed out, while on another, the quiet despair of being let down by our own people whispered softly. Each entry was a testament to the complexities of human emotions, raw and unfiltered, much like life itself. My fingers traced the pages until they stopped, almost quivering, at an October 30th entry:
"Word on the street is that a grand soiree has been thrown by 'Payame Insaniat,' that organization lauding humanity, as a consolation prize for the lives lost in Lucknow. In Qaisar Bagh, compassionate Hindus and anxious Muslims huddled together on stage. They chatted, hoping to awaken our nation's sleeping conscience. It was postulated that the root of this chaos is the tangled web of unchecked materialism, seething jealousy, and blinkered vision. Curiously, the crowd lapped it up. Our leaders, are they truly so witless or do they scheme to shroud reality? It's nothing but an endeavor to reshape the narrative. First off, Moradabad witnessed no Hindu-Muslim strife; instead, the police ruthlessly executed a premeditated massacre of Muslims. Secondly, the endgame is to crush the spirit of Muslims, coercing them to forgo thoughts of their own organization and remain the ever-loyal vote bank for Congress. Why, oh why, do we not cry out this truth? The wails and sorrows of Moradabad's downtrodden, it seems, will fade into the cacophony of impassioned speeches. How utterly bewildering!"

I closed the notebook, a tangle of emotions surging within me, and my gaze found solace in the paper cutter—its delicate and precise cuts revealing an undeniable beauty. It made me think, think about how there was once a time when scholars and warriors mingled seamlessly. Intellectuals and orators who, along with their words, mastered the art of warfare and horsemanship. But, like all good things, this connection between pen and sword frayed, and we were left with the "speech model" of leadership. Grieving mothers and innocent victims reduced to talking points, addressed with a meeting or two before disappearing into the void.

Haleem Bhai's diary was an ocean of pain, each page brimming with suffering. Yet, despite the torment it contained, it couldn't replicate the emotional devastation of his spoken accounts. The diary, though filled with anguish, didn't do justice to the poignant tales he narrated. Oh, how the heart ached when he recounted that fateful evening of August 13th, his words like visceral manifestations of sorrow and despair, tugging relentlessly at the soul. A thought fluttered in my mind, an earnest wish that Haleem Bhai had devoted an entire book to the events of that tragic night. Holding on to this thought, I placed the manuscript in the cupboard with tender care, then looked out the window at the inner lawn of Habib Hall. Students soaked in the rosy winter sunlight, engrossed in newspapers, while others were absorbed in animated discussions. Here too, the speech model of leadership ruled, burying the raw human emotion in a flood of words.

29
Aligarh Magazine: A Whisper in the Wind

One day, amidst the hum of conversation, the topic of leadership's "speech model" emerged in Surati Sahab's presence. He couldn't help but smile upon hearing the term, as if amused by its implications. Then, with a hint of critique in his voice, he shared his thoughts: "Dismissing every gathering or meeting as a mere speech model, that's just not right. What truly matters is the content of what's being said. Words, you see, carry their own gravity and impact. When a message originates from the heart's deepest chambers, it radiates power. 'So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it.' That's the crux of the matter. To challenge falsehood, to voice the truth in defiance of a tyrannical leader—these feats are realized through the strength of our words. Words, in essence, ignite the fires of revolution."

"But what about these ceaseless gatherings? What's your take on them?" I questioned with a sense of frustration. "Time and time again, the government reassures us it won't meddle with the Personal Law of Muslims. And the Personal Law Board adamantly proclaims that they'll never stand for interference in their Personal Law. Nevertheless, one grand assembly follows another, while the government persists in assuring its lack of intent to intrude in the Personal Law. What's the point of it all?"
Surati Sahab flashed a knowing smile before replying, "My friend, this isn't genuine discourse; it's a love affair with eloquence—words uttered without the intent to act. Some cultures are simply captivated by this infatuation. Whether you attend Shia gatherings, where the virtues of the Ahl-e-Bayt are praised and the audience erupts in adulation for each sentiment expressed, or Sunni assemblies extolling the greatness of the Companions, the principal aim often resides within the events themselves. In the pursuit of heightened rhetoric, historical truths are sometimes laid on the altar of sacrifice. When oratory becomes the centerpiece, and gatherings and processions are mistakenly perceived

as panaceas for issues, that's when eloquence morphs into the embodiment of inaction."

"And you claim that each word carries weight, that the truth never goes unnoticed?" I asked.
He responded, "That's a whole different story. Those words make Socrates drink the poison and Hallaj surrender his life. You don't attend Iqbal Ansari's events, where he delves into living, critical issues. He wanted to be a thinker, but ended up wealthy. He wasted time in Saudi Arabia. He's quite the character; you should spend more time with him."
Iqbal sahib would lecture on Shakespearean critiques, but his real spirit blossomed outside the classroom. Sometimes he'd debate investigative commission reports, or police reforms, or constitutional guarantees of human rights, or instances of ethnic violence, which he referred to as pogroms or genocides. He wasn't merely a person; he embodied a movement. His sphere of influence reached across multiple directions, deeply connected with human rights organizations nationwide. The conversations held in his meetings carried an air of danger.
Once, in a moment of unrest, we desired to issue a memorandum on behalf of the students. The idea struck us: why not let Iqbal sahib review it? It was already 9 PM, but the endeavor demanded urgent action. Despite our unanticipated presence, he greeted us warmly, refining the draft in the process. Before parting ways, he cautioned, "Delegate a few individuals to this cause. I'm ever-present, but should any misfortune befall you, at the very least have a couple of people ready to stand by you without hesitation." He recognized that discussing sensitive, charged subjects in this country, in truth, invited peril.

In those days, I found myself immersed in the role of secretary for the English Literature Society, a bustling hub where events of various sizes unfolded from time to time. Among the esteemed teachers, Zahoor Usmani Sahab stood out, his presence and participation emanating unbridled enthusiasm. With a wellspring of profound knowledge, the allure of Usmani Sahab's company was irresistible,

leaving one yearning for more hours in conversation. His awe-inspiring translations of Persian poetry resonated deeply, igniting the imagination. As a group, we pooled our resources to ensure that tea and coffee graced these cherished gatherings.

On one occasion, friends proposed that we invite the austere Professor Ansari to not only preside over the next event, but also arrange the tea. Though the suggestion was sound, we knew the formidable presence of Professor Ansari could be intimidating. With his scholarly air and commanding persona, even the most boisterous student chatter would cease upon his approach in the corridors of the Arts Faculty. Young men, enraptured by the love song "Jab Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya," would adopt an air of reverence when he passed by Shamsad Market, as if caught in the act of some misdeed. Undeterred, I summoned the courage to extend the invitation to Professor Ansari. After pondering my request, he agreed without so much as a glance in my direction: "Why not, why not." With his consent, the tea party was set in motion. Exiting the room, I marveled at my own audacity and wondered at the potential consequences had his gaze met mine.

As the event drew to a close, I expressed my gratitude to Professor Ansari for providing the tea, emphasizing that it wasn't the tea itself that mattered, but the company with which it was shared. Some friends construed my sentiment as sycophancy or flattery and scrutinized it through the prism of Aligarh's culture, overlooking the genuine respect and affection that existed between student and teacher. During one annual departmental event, my peers jokingly bestowed upon me the moniker "Mister Shadwell," likening me to a poetaster in jest at my literary abilities. While such titles typically held little weight and were often met with laughter, Professor Ansari couldn't simply brush it off. In his closing remarks, he addressed the matter with gravity, deeming the title a manifestation of poor taste and rejecting its validity in relation to me.

In an unexpected stroke of serendipity, Jafar Zaki Sahab, who would later become my cherished mentor and supervisor, invited me into his

office one day. With a twinkle in his eye, he informed me that Professor Ansari had personally expressed his desire for me to take on the responsibility of editing the Aligarh Magazine. They say a blind man dreams of two eyes, but when fate places something so fortuitous before you, it's natural to seize the opportunity.
However, I couldn't resist setting forth a few conditions. I told Jafar Sahab that although I was ready to embrace this significant responsibility, I sought the freedom to assemble my own team. Without missing a beat, he smiled warmly and assured me there would be no issue with that.

In Jafar Zaki Sahab's office, there stood a wooden cupboard that seemed to have a personality of its own, and I soon found out that this was the very workspace of the Aligarh Magazine. He generously presented me with the keys to the room and the cupboard, and I instantly delved into the whirlwind of planning the next issue. One day, while flipping through the pages of past issues, I stumbled upon the magazine's 1961 special humor edition. This edition was a gem, a true masterpiece in editorial craftsmanship, with each piece of writing finding its rightful place and immaculately edited.

The names that surfaced as I skimmed through the pages were like a breath of fresh air; familiar faces from different phases of my life. There was Mushtaq Ahmed Yousufi, the mastermind who playfully critiqued modesty in the humor issue and later transformed into the emperor of wit. Mohammad Hamid Ansari, a name that once dissected the pathology of sports, now held the prestigious title of Vice President of the Republic. Anwar Siddiqi, who had cleverly unraveled the tyranny of the dining hall, went on to become a head of department at Jamia Millia and even served as one of my PhD examiners. Mohammad Hasan, who had once declared the suicide of culture in his article, now graced the academic stage as a notable Urdu critic and professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Moin Raza, who had whimsically captured the essence of examiners, now enjoyed fame as an esteemed geographer, a founding member of Jawaharlal Nehru University, and the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University. And, of

course, there was the exceptional Syed Zainul Abideen, who had woven an imaginative tale of a journey to Aligarh in 1994, and now held the reins of the Jeddah-based journal on minority affairs, a publication revered for its soaring academic heights.

In a stroke of genius, the perceptive editor of the humor issue had penned: "Our lives have grown so heavy with grief and despair that we must find moments to shrug off these burdens and peer at life through a different lens. If not roaring with laughter, then let us, at the very least, discover a reason to smile."

While Aalia Kazmi pursued her Master's degree, she found solace in collecting a diverse range of literary stories, flavored with humor and wit. She recounted an instance when Jonathan Swift pondered over the conundrum of why feminine beauty evaded taxation in a world where nearly everything else attracted taxes. A solution arose from the complexity of valuing beauty, suggesting that women take it upon themselves to assess and contribute accordingly – guaranteeing that even those lacking appeal would pay their share.

Another delightful tale meandered around Maxim Gorky's night at an inn where sleep eluded him, thanks to an army of bedbugs. Upon raising the issue with the innkeeper the next morning, the proprietor vehemently denied the existence of even a solitary bedbug. Gorky, quick-witted, responded with a tongue-in-cheek comment about not referring to "single" bedbugs, but rather an extensive, thriving married community of bedbugs with countless offspring.

Lastly, Aalia shared a whimsical anecdote involving Bernard Shaw at a musical event, where the notes of a violinist stirred something within him. Shaw declared, "Today, as I watch this person play the violin, I am reminded of Padirosky." Inquisitive listeners pointed out that Padirosky was not a violinist, to which Shaw playfully replied, "so he is not either?"

On the magazine's concluding page, there existed an intriguing proclamation: the imminent edition would be devoted to the art of satire. While the eventual outcome of this audacious endeavor remains shrouded in mystery, examining the current issue sparked a creative musing within the depths of my consciousness – the conception of an exclusive issue, concentrated on a theme that's both vivacious and deeply thought-provoking.

30
Nellie: Not the Name of a Girl

As the balmy embrace of summer approached, Khaled Mian would deftly navigate his mobile eatery to the welcoming inner gates of Habib Hall. The early mornings came alive as the irresistible scent of potato-stuffed parathas pirouetted through the labyrinth of hostel rooms, charming breakfast orders from every corner. For a mere rupee, one could indulge in a steaming hot paratha, lovingly adorned with complimentary tomato chutney—a captivating affair, indeed. And if one's heart was set on a more decadent delight, a sumptuous omelette could effortlessly find its way to your plate.

Perhaps it was a languid Sunday morning or a well-deserved holiday. From the sanctuary of my upper floor quarters, I called out to Khaled Mian, my eyes drifting to Shamsi. There he sat, ensconced in the verdant splendor of the lawn, savoring his breakfast and meandering through the pages of the newspaper, surrounded by the camaraderie of fellow scholars. It struck me that Shamsi may well have been privy to my voice, carried on the gentle morning breeze.

"Hey, descend from your ivory tower! Confront the earthly realities for once!" Shamsi implored with intensity.

Finding solace in Shamsi's invitation, I reflected on how my life had changed since starting my M.A. classes. I had retreated from extra-curricular activities, as our professors constantly emphasized the need for unwavering focus, insisting that the desired intellectual gem could only be obtained through relentless determination. Specialized study of Shakespeare and supplementary readings in world literature—including voluminous novels and classical works in Russian, French, German, and other languages—left little room for additional engagements.

Consequently, not only did scholarly discussions with various student circles diminish, but I also lost the opportunity to peruse newspapers and journals. Shamsi's tone carried a hint of lament. There was a time when I used to join lively gatherings at dawn and dusk, participated in

animated debates over ancient texts, but now I was confined to late-night seclusion in the English Department's study rooms. This single-minded pursuit of academic excellence had overshadowed the once vibrant and dynamic environment, a palpable loss in the tapestry of my life's experiences.

The conversation swirled below, like an undercurrent of frustration and despair, as the voices shared tales of Muslim tribulations. One individual, caught in the vividness of his own emotions, exclaimed, "Our national leaders, they're quite the enigmatic bunch! The government plays a game of reassurance, claiming no intention of meddling in personal laws, while our leaders passionately vow not to tolerate any interference. Why, oh why, do they dance around the real issues instead of confronting them head-on? The catastrophic Nellie riots unfolded, yet within our community, the outcry and action are conspicuously absent."
"Absolutely," chimed in another scholar, his voice tinged with an unsettling mix of sorrow and anger. "Three thousand Muslims perished in a horrifyingly brief seven hours."
"Three thousand? That's the sanitized, official count. But whispers among the people tell a more harrowing tale, suggesting the death toll could be closer to ten thousand."
My heart stuttered at the enormity, "Ten thousand?"
He nodded gravely, "Some journalists have even branded the Nellie massacre as the most heinous event since the dark days of the Second World War."
"The brutality of it all was nothing short of monstrous. It was as if the Bengali Muslim settlements in Nellie and its surroundings were thrown to the wolves, savagely attacked from every angle. The cacophony of drums and trumpets, the cries of 'Joi Aoi Ahom' (Long Live Mother Assam), and the bloodthirsty mob wielding spears, swords, and modern weapons, only served to intensify the relentless assault. First, they set the houses ablaze, driving the living into the open fields, and then the merciless mass killings began. Women and children, their innocent souls, were targeted with particular cruelty."

Shamsi, his voice heavy with sorrow, interjected, "Do you know why? They're hell-bent on extinguishing our very lineage."
"I've heard whispers that even Mrs. Gandhi ventured to the tragic site, and now the President plans to follow suit.
“Could it be that the government has finally found a shred of empathy for the suffering of Muslims?" The question hung in the air, unanswered, as a reflection of the uncertainty that shrouded our futures.

"Oh, sweet delusion, this dance we engage in, a whirlwind of political deceit and manipulation. This chaotic spectacle, born of Mrs. Gandhi's ambition and unrelenting nature, leaves us battered and bruised," Shamsi exhaled, his voice tinged with melancholy.
"Could it be?" I muttered, hesitating as disbelief and curiosity intertwined.
"Indeed," Shamsi confirmed, pulling the latest issue of India Today from his worn-out satchel, his eyes glowing with conviction. "The general sentiment was that Assam's socio-political atmosphere was ill-suited for elections. A kaleidoscope of opposition parties - the BJP, Janata Party, and both factions of the Lok Dal - fervently pushed for an election boycott. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, often painted as a moderate figure, was once posthumously dubbed India's 'invaluable gem' by a cleric of a religious congregation. This very man had unabashedly proclaimed that a swayamsevak remains a swayamsevak for life. His impassioned oration alluded to the tempestuous events yet to unfold."
Shamsi's voice swelled with intensity, his words cascading like a waterfall, "Vajpayee had declared, 'Foreign settlers are pouring in, and the government stands idly by. If they had entered Punjab, imagine the consequences! People would have torn them limb from limb and discarded them like debris.'" The weight of his words lingered, casting shadows of despair, revealing the intricate tapestry woven by political machinations.
In this precarious situation, Mrs. Gandhi's resolve to hold elections at any cost created an air of apprehension. The election boycott had gained substantial public support, and when the Bengali Muslims, who were backed by Congress, expressed their intention to vote, it sparked

a conflict. Bengali Muslims found themselves caught in the whirlwind of political turmoil, an unexpected yet bitter consequence.
"And so, it appears that once again, Muslims have become pawns in Congress's cunning political maneuvers," Shamsi remarked, a note of sadness coloring his voice.
"You see, the Muslim population in Assam constitutes around thirty-five percent," he continued, the weight of his concern evident in his tone. "After Kashmir, this is the only state where Muslims possess a decisive numerical sway. Mrs. Gandhi's objective is to ensure that the collective Muslim vote remains in her party's grasp. Historically, it has been the unwavering support of Muslims that has enabled Congress to maintain its reign in Assam."

"And so there was this Muslim woman who held the title of Chief Minister."
You're talking about Anwara Taimur, right? She was only in that position for a fleeting two months, but isn't it always the people who end up paying the true cost for these symbolic gestures?
The conversation continued to flow, and my mind couldn't help but be pulled towards the enormity of the Nellie incident, which had somehow evaded my awareness. For days on end, I had heard whispers of Nellie in passing conversations, but I never found the opportunity to pause and inquire about the nature of this ominous calamity. Students would casually toss around the names of cricket players, the World Cup, the West Indies, Steffi Graf, and other such enigmatic expressions. Some of these words would eventually fade into the conversational ether. I had assumed Nellie was just another one of those transient topics, something I needn't concern myself with. After all, sports never really held any allure for me, nor did I possess any knowledge of them.
Just a few days earlier, a cricket match had been arranged between the students of the first and second years of the MA program. Girls from both classes had come to cheer on their classmates. The players, too, were brimming with an extraordinary fervor, for such occasions were perceived as suitable opportunities to showcase chivalry within the tradition-loving society of Aligarh. The following day, the students

expressed their discontent over my absence. They said, "You didn't show up; we had such a blast, and we really missed you." I feigned being preoccupied, offered my apologies, and inquired about the victors. They replied, "We were." I asked, "By how many goals?" Upon hearing this, they appeared bewildered. Some chuckled, while others remarked that my absence was, in fact, a blessing. I had assumed that perhaps this Nellie was the name of a student and felt it appropriate to distance myself from these discussions. However, when the latest issue of India Today arrived and I caught sight of the headline "The Burning of Assam" with an accompanying image of houses ablaze, my heart plummeted. I was consumed with frustration at my own negligence.

In an article by India Today, it was unveiled that on February 12, 1983, when Mrs. Gandhi touched down in Guwahati aboard an Air Force helicopter, she was all too aware that she held a metaphorical bomb in her hands, one that could detonate at any moment. Determined to emerge victorious in the election, she addressed heavily fortified rallies with a calculated focus on Muslim-majority regions, seeking to capture 35% of the Muslim vote.

Skillfully wielding the Muslim card, she found herself navigating a political landscape fraught with opposition. It was a world where all opposing parties stood firmly against the election, and government agencies predicted a mere 20% voter turnout, primarily in Muslim-majority areas, due to the widespread boycott.

Amidst crumbling infrastructure and communications, Mrs. Gandhi sought to usher Muslims to the polling booths, attempting to force the election's hand. But the Assam Students Union and Gun Parishad had other plans, engaging in an 18-day non-cooperation movement that paralyzed the region. A staggering 150,000 military and paramilitary forces were deployed in a desperate attempt to regain control.

In this chaotic atmosphere, the Congress party emerged, positioning itself as the savior of Muslims. Ghani Khan Choudhury, the Central Railway Minister, and leader of the Indira Congress, implored Muslims to vote for the Congress, lest they be cast back into

Bangladesh by their enemies. Fearful, the Muslim population resolved to support the Congress.
Ultimately, it was the Muslims who bore the brunt of the public's ire, caught in the crossfire of the Congress party's unyielding and ill-conceived political machinations. India Today lamented that while Mrs. Gandhi would likely never be held to account for her missteps, it would be the nation and its people who would be left to shoulder the consequences.

In the unexpected comfort of oblivion, I found myself contemplating. A calamity had befallen the Muslims of Assam, and yet, I remained untouched by its winds. These days, I've been lost in the pages of the acclaimed novel Buddenbrooks by German writer Thomas Mann. In his narrative, Mann weaves a tapestry of a merchant family's saga, spanning generations, where the first generation's triumphs in business ultimately lead to the gradual disintegration of their legacy.
The first generation conquers, while the subsequent ones fail to preserve their hard-earned status. This Buddenbrooks effect is a relentless force, equally potent in the realms of politics and commerce. Its power lies in the fact that while the following generations inherit the prestige, they lose their connection to the mission statement that brought it to life. The decline of the Mughals, Ottomans, Romans, and Persians can all be seen through the lens of the Buddenbrooks effect.
As the novel unfolds, we see that by the fourth generation, the once-mighty family is reduced to a single girl, the last vestige of a crumbling legacy. The Muslims in Nellie, too, faced the horrors of an organized genocide. One wonders if the Indian Muslims are on the precipice of a similar descent into destruction. What has become of their guiding principles? How did they find themselves ensnared in the merciless clutches of the Congress party's Machiavellian politics?

I pondered extensively, but no lucid picture emerged. Then one day, while wandering aimlessly through Shamsabad Market, I was drawn to the latest issue of India Today. The cover showed a haunting scene of innocent children being buried en masse. The entire field was awash

with the lifeless bodies of children, strewn about like discarded toys. Compelled by the macabre image, I purchased the magazine.
The pages within displayed a series of bone-chilling photographs, etching themselves into my psyche. It seemed the attackers intended not only to obliterate an entire generation of Muslims but also to snuff out any women who might bring more Muslim children into the world. The unspeakable carnage began at eight in the morning and, as some reports stated, continued unabated throughout the day and deep into the night.

What struck me as odd was that when Mrs. Gandhi visited the scene of the massacre just days later, she found no trace of the horrifying events. How could all signs of such brutality be so swiftly erased? The report said that the fields were soaked red from the blood of countless victims. Bodies of women, children, and elderly, mutilated beyond recognition, lay scattered like leaves in the wind. Yet, this landscape of anguish seemed to have evaporated almost instantly.

Driven by a mixture of sorrow and disbelief, I jotted down a brief note on the magazine's cover, a reminder for my own chronicles:
"The unrelenting, gut-wrenching devastation that washed over Nellie's inhabitants remains unfathomable to the average person. Whether it's three thousand or ten thousand lives that were snuffed out, the sheer numbers fail to capture the soul-crushing weight of the collective agony. If only we could truly grasp that these now-lifeless bodies were once ordinary human beings, flesh-and-blood individuals like ourselves, given just a single chance at life. But it begs the question: Will the largest massacre to ever stain the soil of an independent India be etched indelibly in our collective consciousness?"

There I was, buried in the past as if it were a tragic love story, living in Aligarh in 2013, and devoting my days to the act of writing. An opportunity to be a professor at the Muslim University was presented to me, and so, my academic background needed unveiling. In search of my credentials, I found a dusty issue of India Today, my old notes still clinging to it, and just like that, the ghosts of the Nellie Massacre of

1983 were reawakened. Perhaps it was fate or the cosmic indifference of the universe that saw Makiko Kimura, a Japanese author, arrive at Jawaharlal Nehru University to research and ultimately tell the story. For years, only a few fleeting accounts had surfaced, like Hemendra Narain's brief but poignant book, 25 Years on... Nellie Still Haunts, a confessional of a tormented journalist who couldn't shake the images of the massacre he had witnessed. The echoes of the tragedy reverberated through Subasri Krishnan's documentary, What the Fields Remember, telling Khairuddin's agonizing tale of fleeing with his children. There's this inescapable horror, you see – the moment when the blade cuts through the air, his older child's life extinguished. And with the younger one, he dives into a pond, only to look back and see the nightmarish sight of his child's severed head swinging like a pendulum of despair.

Khairuddin lost 39 souls from his family that day, and the shadows of the past continue to haunt him. He seeks justice, knocking on the cold, unyielding doors of courts, but justice seems to have turned a blind eye. The Tiwari Commission's report remains shrouded in secrecy, and of those accused, many roam free. The 1985 Assam Accord, signed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, granted general amnesty to the 299 accused, leaving Khairuddin and fellow survivors to scream into the void in their quest for justice. And so, the story unfolds, with the survivors' cries for justice reverberating in the darkness, unanswered. The weight of the tragedy lingers, and we must ask ourselves – who listens to the cries of the unheard?

In August 2007, when Makiko Kimura ventured to Nellie for her second research sojourn, she found herself enveloped in a haunting atmosphere of heartache and torment, even after decades had elapsed. One voice whispered that seventy of their loved ones had been taken; another confided that their mother had miraculously endured twenty-six wounds but at the cost of seventeen family members. And yet, amidst the pervasive anguish, echoes of the promises made by Mrs. Gandhi to the Muslims of Nellie during their rehabilitation continued to reverberate in the air.

"Indira Gandhi asked us to vote for her, and when she came here after the massacre, she reassured us, saying, 'What happened has happened, but you shouldn't have to leave this place. I'll do everything possible to help in your rehabilitation. I'm here for you in every way. You don't have to worry.' She whispered promises of transforming this grief-stricken land into a utopian village, where houses would rise from the ashes, roads would weave through like veins of hope, and hospitals, schools, and police stations would stand as testaments to a brighter future. But, as it turned out, all we got were a measly two thousand rupees and three bundles of tin sheets to patch up the roofs that once sheltered our dreams.

Kimura raises her voice, pointing to the glaring disparity that persists, a chilling reminder of inequality. Muslim victims were handed a pittance, just five thousand rupees, as though their pain was less, their grief less valid. And yet, the families of the fallen attackers were given thirty-five thousand rupees, as if the lives they took held no weight. How can such a disparity exist? How can one not ache at the thought of such blatant injustice?
And let us not forget the more recent tragedy - 47 lives from Bihar, extinguished in Upper Assam. The Samajwadi Party offered solace in the form of one lakh rupees to each family, while the Assam government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and the Bihar government added their contributions, bringing the sum to seven lakh rupees. In a similar act of empathy, Manmohan Singh raised the compensation for victims of anti-Sikh riots in Delhi to seven lakh rupees.
So, why then, amidst this ocean of tears and pain, are the lives of Muslims valued so meagerly? Offered a mere five thousand rupees, their suffering left to fester and their voices left unheard. The stark injustice leaves a bitter taste, a wound that refuses to heal.

As I delve into Mieko Kamura's writings, my soul aches for the Muslims of Nellie, who even today cling to the hopes of justice while reminiscing the promises made by Indira Gandhi. In these utopian

settlements established by Gandhi in and around Nellie, people's pleas for justice fell on deaf ears, as the torment of their lives overshadowed every other hardship. Now, even the gravest acts of oppression and brutality appear to pale in comparison to the deep-seated wounds that Nellie has inflicted upon them. According to the Economic and Political Weekly (May 20, 1995), in July 1994, one thousand Bengali Muslims found themselves at the mercy of Bodo militants in the Barpeta district of Lower Assam. In the wake of this tragedy, thousands were left injured and more than sixty villages were reduced to ashes. Even those seeking refuge within the government-sanctioned camps were not spared from the bloodbath. Perhaps the lack of public outrage over this incident is a stark reminder that, in this country, the mass murder of Muslims has become an all-too-common occurrence.

The note on India Today's masthead clung to my heart and soul with such intensity that I couldn't help but be consumed by the thought of what steps we could take to preserve these harrowing memories in our collective psyche. I found myself contemplating the notion that memories are a sacred trust, and the weight of our shared recollections holds no less importance than a national obligation.

In a world where nations fail to protect their own memories, they inadvertently leave themselves vulnerable to the whims of those who would rewrite history with malevolent intent. This twisted and deceitful version of the past offers little in the way of wisdom, instead leading us to repeat the same tragic mistakes over and over again. This concern rings especially true in a country where those in power possess the insidious ability to vanish evidence into the night, painting themselves as messiahs rather than the criminals they truly are, all in a desperate attempt to veil their transgressions. In such a world, how can we, as a collective, ensure that the truth of our past remains unblemished and that the lessons we so desperately need to learn are not lost in the ever-shifting sands of time?

During those days, a dream visited me in the depths of the night, as Professor emerged, swathed in an aura of furious intensity. There he

stood, shrouded in grime and blood, and after a moment of pensive silence, his voice emerged, heavy with emotion: "This agony lingers, it hesitates but never reaches its end. Let someone beseech the heavens for reprieve, for mercy."
Curiosity compelled me to inquire about the cause of his suffering, and in response, he raised his fist into the air, consumed by his indignation. He exclaimed, "Do you not see? Those who once held dominion here are now stripped of power, laid bare in their vulnerability. Ah, the gut-wrenching scenes of a fractured land. The once-great leaders and dignitaries, now cloaked in the garments of disgrace. Tender Muslim maidens, torn away like prey for the predators. Those who once basked in the esteem of the world, now left in tatters at the hands of cruel fate."
"And sweet Faatima... that fragile, guileless child, my sister, a mere twelve years in age. Do you know the atrocities that were inflicted upon her? At first, she was forced to bear witness to the desecration of other women – as if that wasn't torment enough. And then, she herself became the object of insatiable lust. They threatened to end her life, but for some inexplicable reason, they spared her. Though her body survived, her spirit was shattered, broken. She couldn't share her pain with anyone. Whom could she accuse? From whom could she seek solace or justice?" The professor let out a soul-shattering sigh and stared, lost and powerless, at the vast expanse of the sky above.

Fatima now dances among the stars, her spirit wandering through the ethereal gardens of a celestial paradise. I tried to offer solace to the professor, but he gazed at me with an air of bewilderment, as if I were a naive child. "You're so out of touch," he said, "You have no idea of the world's cruel truths." I last glimpsed her amidst the chaos of Nellie.
"Perhaps, dear Professor, your memories have become a tangled web, and that's why the bard of time cries out for liberation from the burdens of recollection," I suggested. He countered, "That's hardly a solution either. Even if past memories dissipate, new tragedies give birth to increasingly bitter remembrances, and these painful memories persist, tenacious and unyielding."

"If a major catastrophe reaches its denouement, you may recover and mend the tattered tapestry of life. However, when calamity transforms into an unending nightmare, these memories evolve into perpetual wounds, festering sores that extinguish any ember of hope. It feels as though one is condemned to a life steeped in ceaseless suffering. The anguish of this devastating blow cannot be contained within the confines of language crafted for ordinary circumstances. In truth, this is the very torment that plagues the hearts of India's Muslims."

"Then how can we illuminate the path of the future with the radiance of memories?" I asked, my voice quivering with the weight of the question.
He replied, a poetic lilt in his tone, "Through the woven tapestry of stories and narratives, we find the deepest roots of understanding. For it is within these tales that the reader may feel the touch of reality, as if it grazed the strings of their very soul. This celestial style is much like the language of divine books, where allegories and parables are employed to convey lofty ideas and extraordinary events that cannot be transmitted through ordinary human language."

The words seemed to dance around us as he continued, "Even Nietzsche, in his work Thus Spake Zarathustra, tried to adopt this celestial style to grasp the essence of the lightning bolt. But when language is burdened beyond its capacity, it stumbles and falls. It is then that we see the breaking of language, and sometimes even the shattering of the speaker's very core."

I asked: Does a cure exist for this torment, or are Indian Muslims fated to bear these wounds in perpetuity? He replied: No affliction exists without a remedy. The first step in this process is diagnosing the malady. Those ensnared by ceaseless suffering grow so habituated to their pain that breaking free feels like an insurmountable feat. Yet, those who have become accustomed to perpetual oppression and whose actions have forged this lamentable state for Indian Muslims cannot find solace either; their conscience gnaws at them, leaving them in a perpetual state of unease. It is erroneous to assume they are devoid of

conscience. Within the wails and laments of the oppressed, divine promises of succor and compassion emerge, providing the means to mend their wounds. Conversely, the oppressor finds no other path to quell their restlessness and anguish but to pursue further cruelty. As a result, they become ensnared in a nefarious whirlpool, sealing their ill-fated destiny.

I asked why, in moments when language fails to encapsulate our thoughts, we writers choose to engage in a dance of empty words, leading both ourselves and others astray. 'Ah, you see this void before you, this canvas of crooked lines – they exist because, in the relentless face of oppression, silence is more treacherous than any illusion we may weave. Thoughts left unspoken, forever suspended in the ether!'

I felt as if a somber veil had descended upon their persona. This fragmented, frayed, and seemingly lost soul appeared to harbor within it a silent cry, imploring, "O Creator of the Universe, why have You inflicted such wounds upon my spirit?" While bodily injuries are visible, when the soul has been scarred, only an unrelenting agony remains; a ceaseless, invisible wound, an everlasting and unending torment.

I asked, "Why don't Indian Muslims create a memorial or a monument to commemorate this immense tragedy? We have a living tradition of mourning for Hussain, with poignant dirges, elegies, soul-stirring recitations by soz-khwans, and miraculous narrations by zakireen. Despite all of this, why haven't we been able to bring our suffering to the world's attention? Like the Jewish community, we could at least establish a memorial for this devastating event, where a plaque bearing the words 'Never Again' could be prominently displayed.

He said: Our wounds, they run so much deeper than those of the Jewish people, and yet, we find ourselves struggling to truly grasp the magnitude of our suffering. The Jewish people, they managed to build museums, monuments to their bitter memories, because they had survived post-trauma, but we, Indian Muslims, we're caught in a

never-ending cycle of Continuous Traumatic Disorder. Each new generation, their suffering only intensifies, building upon the agony of the ones that came before. New challenges emerge, making old threats feel almost inconsequential, and so the graph of our pain keeps on rising.

Our torment is unrelenting, a ceaseless anguish marked by commas, but no full stops. It's only when this crisis is, at least momentarily, brought to a halt that we might even have a chance to truly understand the depth of the calamity we've faced. Here, there are no gas chambers or concentration camps. Instead, it's an intangible process, an enigmatic horror that even the most respected leaders of Indian Muslims find themselves unable to truly fathom.

31
Besieged Leadership

Over and over, my father's words echo in my mind: One generation will slip by just unraveling this web of deceit. And then, when I ponder upon it, if we—the children of today—manage to decode the puzzle, isn't it only fitting that the universe sets the stage for the next generation to leap into action? So I mused: What if we turn to the Aligarh Magazine, using it as a platform to dissect the dilemma and spotlight the tribulations of Indian Muslims in a special edition? My friends, thrilled by the proposal, embarked on a quest to prepare that special issue, delving deep into the annals of published books and articles strewn across various journals and magazines. As I embarked on this journey, I stumbled upon two books, both penned by authors with the surname Smith. One, by Donald Eugene Smith, was titled "India as a Secular State," while the other, "Islam in Modern History," was written by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In the first book, the author peeled back the layers of Indian secularism, shining a light on the myriad evidences and documented proofs. Even though two decades had passed since its publication, as I read it, I couldn't help but grasp the depths of the issue, realizing that the challenges faced by Indian Muslims demanded a special edition born from extensive, multi-faceted research. As an editor, I knew I needed to become acquainted with the literature on this subject to stand tall on the shoulders of those who came before me, confidently pointing the way to fresh, untrodden paths.

As time wore on, the rigors of academia became ever more consuming, and I hardly registered the start of the second academic year. Our two deputy editors had diverged in their paths. Manoj Yadav, who would later ascend the ranks to a top position in the CBI, and Sohail Ahmad, who would ultimately oversee prisons in Madhya Pradesh, were immersed in publishing their Hall magazines. In the midst of it all, news arrived that a group of our male and female students would represent the department at an international book fair in Delhi. It felt

like fate itself was bestowing upon us a golden opportunity to discover new and rare books on the subject. To be able to explore the book fair under Asloob Sahib's tutelage was truly an unparalleled stroke of fortune. We made our way home late into the evening. On the bus, the seating was arranged such that Asloob Sahib and his trusted aide, Dr. Rizwanuddin, who was tasked with managing the seminar library but mostly kept a watchful eye on the students' moral comportment, sat in the row just ahead of us.

The journey spanned three to four hours, and as the bus progressed, clusters of students engaged in lively conversations with one another. Rafat and Farida sat nearby me. These two young women embodied grace and sophistication, their appreciation for poetry and literature deeply ingrained within them. They threw themselves into extracurricular activities with the same fervor and zeal as if they were competing for academic excellence. Despite their spirited and playful dispositions, their heads were always modestly covered with a dupatta. When they greeted someone in their distinct style, it felt as though they had effortlessly charmed the heart of the person on the receiving end.

As the journey unfolded before us, Raffat's desire to share the poetic words of Iqbal with me surged like a wave. Her voice, a harmonious symphony, danced through the air as she sang "Looh Bhi Tu, Qalam Bhi Tu." With each recited verse, the spirit of the great poet seemed to breathe life into our surroundings. But the journey, a living metaphor for our own lives, had not yet reached its end, and it was as if she could sense the deep hunger within me for more. And so, she transitioned to the melody of a film song, "De De Pyar De, De De Pyar De (Grant me your love, I pray) ..." Her soulful enthusiasm wrapped itself around each note, weaving a tapestry of emotion. I found myself ensnared in an enigmatic conundrum, as I sat sandwiched between two worlds – the profound poetry of Iqbal and the catchy tune of a film song.

Asloob Sahab, occupying the seat in front of me, suddenly found himself awash in the unexpected refrain of "De De Pyar De." With furrowed brow, he whispered his concerns to Rizwan Sahab. Rizwan Sahab, his gaze taking on the weight of a thousand judgments, craned his long neck back and uttered, "Fear not; the girls are simply singing songs for Shaz Sahab." As the words settled, a gentle veil of reassurance descended upon Asloob Sahab, and his worries evaporated into the ether.
The very next day, Rizwan Sahab regaled us with a retelling of this curious tale, a story now woven into the fabric of our shared experiences.

The moment the Aligarh Magazine announced a special issue on Muslim issues, some individuals just couldn't wait to weave a web of rumors about me. They took pleasure in painting me as an extremist, somehow convinced that I was using the university magazine to spread my allegedly radical views. One notorious character, known for his tilted cap, went out of his way to depict me as a fiercely dogmatic youth. Yet, anyone who knew me could see that I was as liberal as they come. Imagine, me—a person who could sit among enchanting women and listen to them sing the romantic tune "De De Pyar De" (Grant me love, I pray) —being accused of Islamic extremism. It's almost laughable. But life has a funny way of throwing curveballs, and there are times when the nefarious intentions of others cast a dark shadow, blinding reason and arguments.

During the magazine's preparatory phase, my compassionate mentor and the esteemed censor, Asloob Ansari Sahab, retired. At the same time, my MA results came in, securing me the top position. Yet, this accomplishment did not work in my favor, as it meant I was no longer a student in the technical sense. The new censor, in our first meeting, made an attempt to break my spirit by seizing upon this detail. He began to read my editorial, placing marks in various places before saying, "You are at the dawn of your career, and you have so much potential ahead of you. By penning editorials like this, you are igniting

a fire that may consume your future. You can't grasp these subtleties just yet."
With the utmost grace, I replied that perhaps in the days to come, I might come to appreciate these nuances. But for now, I could only comprehend the lessons I had learned at this juncture in my life. I left my sentence hanging, unfinished. Sensing the escalating tension, Jafar Zaki Sahab stepped in and convinced me to remove a few paragraphs, citing their extraordinary length as the reason.

Meanwhile, among the gossipmongers who sported tilted caps, whispers circulated that Vice-Chancellor Syed Hamid Sahab was troubled by my seemingly extremist nature and its connection to the magazine. Yet, curiously enough, during those times, whenever our paths crossed, he never failed to greet me with his usual tenderness and affection. Although I had technically outgrown my student status, he graciously granted me permission to remain in the hostel and generously bolstered the magazine's financial resources. As a result, this special issue saw the light of day in significantly higher numbers than any of its predecessors.

Upon the magazine's release, the first letter that graced my hands, brimming with praise and encouragement, arrived from none other than Maulana Ali Mian Nadwi. In his missive, he expressed:
"The 1984 special issue of Aligarh Magazine has just now reached me, leaving me uncertain whether it faced a delayed publication or simply a late arrival in my possession. Your penned lines and my own interview were a delight to read, bringing me immense satisfaction. I must admit, I was unaware of the true extent of your English writing prowess prior to this issue. The articles within seem to herald a bright and shining future in both the literary and journalistic realms for you. May Allah make this a reality. It is my belief that you should nurture and hone this talent, striving for even greater heights. Admittedly, I approached the interview with a sense of trepidation and doubt; however, upon reading it, I am relieved to find it an accurate reflection of my thoughts, capturing the majority of essential points. Please, accept my heartfelt congratulations on this accomplishment."

I had been acquainted with Maulana Ali Mian for quite some time. Our exchange of letters had spanned years, and occasionally, I would find myself a guest at Nadwa or even visiting their ancestral home in Raebareli. One particularly memorable experience was when I had the honor of spending several days in Raebareli during Ramadan at Maulana's special invitation. In my close observations of Maulana, I found him to be a paragon of grace, elegance, and the epitome of moral and cultural virtues.
However, there was a moment when I was genuinely taken aback. It happened after the Asr prayer when piles of Amli seeds were laid out before the attendees, intended to keep the worshipers engaged in various prayers and spiritual rituals. This practice of keeping disciples occupied has long been a hallmark of the spiritual path. At that time in my life, I was wholly consumed by an intense longing to have a vision of the Prophet. This desire had grown so fervent that I found myself eager to try every time-honored spiritual method and trusted remedy available to those on the spiritual journey.

It was indeed due to Maulana's affections and guidance that when I decided to publish a special issue of the Aligarh Magazine on Muslim issues, the idea of interviewing him on the subject arose. After some correspondence to set the dates, I arrived punctually with my tape recorder to engage in conversation with him. Maulana had a great appreciation for poetry and literature, and that day, his mood seemed quite pleasant. He shared one of his works on Islamic literature and recited a couplet by Iqbal:

Oh connoisseurs, your vision's taste, a charm indeed we see,
Yet sight that can't discern the truth, what kind of sight can be?

As I pressed the record button and initiated the interview, Maulana was slightly taken aback by my first question. "You mentioned it was to be about literature," he said, a hint of confusion in his voice. It seemed we had a small misunderstanding, so I gently clarified that I was there to discuss the special issue of the Aligarh Magazine on

Muslim issues, and that's why I specifically sought an interview with him.

Maulana, hesitant at first, expressed his concerns about the sensitive nature of the subject matter, stating that he didn't think an interview would suit his disposition. He suggested that I should write down my questions and send them to him, and he would respond in writing. But I was persistent in my pursuit of an in-person conversation, even though Maulana appeared unyielding.

My admiration for Maulana was evident in my insistence, but it also showcased an unwavering devotion, accepting whatever decision he would make. While I didn't end up securing the interview, I still took pride in my efforts and returned to my homeland in high spirits. However, when recounting the story of this incomplete interview to my father, he expressed his concerns about my almost reverential manner of approach. He advised me not to be captivated by such reverence, and while acknowledging Maulana's many admirable qualities and authorship, he reminded me that Maulana was not the only luminary in this field. "Learn from him as a student," my father said. "There are plenty of people who can become devotees."

Every time I visited Nadwa, I found myself deemed worthy of special esteem in Maulana's cozy, carpeted gatherings. There were instances when no other chairs were available except for his own, and I couldn't bring myself to sit on the floor as the devotees did. Maulana, conscious of these nuances, consistently treated me with respect as a student. While he may not have perceived me as a disciple, following the magazine's publication, he promptly endorsed my role as editor of the English journal for the Personal Law Board. In a letter penned on December 14th, 1985, he composed:

During Hasnain Syed Sahib's recent sojourn to Lucknow, I had the pleasure of engaging in a lively conversation with him. As we spoke, your name frequently surfaced, accompanied by the thoughtful ideas you've shared, which brought both of us great joy and delight. We concur that the proposal for an English journal is sensible and has a solid foundation. It would be much appreciated if you could extend

this suggestion to Maulana Rahmani Sahib as well, as he might find it of interest.

In a swift turn of events, a letter from Maulana Muntaqilah Rahmani Sahib found its way to me, requesting that I draft a budget for the journal and dive headfirst into its creation. He casually mentioned an upcoming meeting of the executive council of Personal Law in Delhi next month, suggesting that my presence would be rather fitting. Alas, fate had other plans, as my imminent journey to England for my Ph.D. program soon took center stage, and so the once-promising journal project was left to languish in limbo.

During the years spanning 1981 to 1992, I found myself in a time of closeness and deep affection with Maulana Ali Mian. Our paths would cross time and time again, be it in Delhi, Lucknow, or Takiya Kalan, as I would eagerly seek opportunities to meet him. In turn, Maulana would greet me with a warm embrace and treat me with a level of kindness reserved for those he held dear. I vividly remember writing about one such trip to Nadwa in the Aligarh Magazine, recounting our experiences in a similar heartfelt manner:

On September 22, the climate of Nadwa was pleasant and as good as a September morning could be imagined. One of the students led me to the guest house and I was told that the Maulana is likely to come from Rai Bareilly that morning. After an hour or so heard the voice of a vehicle, it was of no other's but of Maulana's.

'Ay! You have come', said the Maulana in a loving sweet tone.

I was offered a cup of tea, the Maulana insisted that I take some biscuits too. We discussed some religio-political problems. He presented me a collection of his literary speeches, and considering a more respectable guest than actually I was, he read out himself some important passages from the book and some verses from Iqbal. The time for the talk was fixed for the next day. The next-day evening, there was the installation of the new student's union at Nadwa. The Maulana asked me to extend my stay for a night and attend the function. 'You are my dear guest, a loved one, I wish you attend the function' said the Maulana. His face calm, full of love, his large eyes

smiling. He insisted again that I stayed on. (The Aligarh Magazine, English edition, 1984, p. 169)

Our frequent meetings wove a tapestry of whispers, fueling speculation that I was being prepared for a more significant role. Yet, the sands of time shifted in December 1992, as the demolition of the Babri Masjid sent shockwaves through our longstanding relationship. I found myself announcing the first Grand Session of the Milli Parliament in Delhi amidst the echoes of despair. The Muslim community was in turmoil, and the national leadership, demoralized.
In the midst of the chaos, a new vision emerged, embraced by many—a fresh way of thinking and organizing for the Muslim community. Months of dedication culminated in an invitation for beleaguered Muslims and young leaders from across the country to join us at the gathering in Delhi's Mavlankar Hall, under the scorching heat of May.
Ali Mian and I had been close, so I held out hope that he would support this revolutionary mission. Though I didn't anticipate his direct involvement, I sent my brother Faheem Akhtar to request a message of support. Upon reading my letter, Maulana expressed his reservations, stating, "In the current situation, I don't think it's appropriate to introduce new leadership." My esteemed brother implored him to provide a written response, but Maulana opted for a verbal message instead. This incident cast a shadow on the warmth that once existed between Maulana and me, and we continued our separate journeys in our distinct realms.

My last encounter with Maulana took place during the days that followed his stroke. With an incredible resilience, he had made significant progress in his recovery. I brought him a copy of my book, "Indian Muslims: Fifty Years of the Lost Era," which I held close to my heart. As he flipped through the pages, his eyes sparkled with delight, and in a gesture of reciprocal generosity, he asked a servant to bring a copy of his own book, "Qur'anic Teachings." With a tender smile, he said, "Please accept this book of equal size as a gift from me."
In the evening, a general assembly commenced, where Maulana Abdullah Abbas and several other distinguished individuals gathered

in a convivial atmosphere. My companion, Abdul Hameed Savanor, who had accompanied me on this journey, broached the subject of my belief that Indian Muslims had been experiencing political apostasy for quite some time. He turned to Maulana, eager to hear his thoughts on the matter.
Maulana listened to the question, but silence enveloped him. It seemed as though he was not inclined to engage in such a discussion at the time. When Abdul persisted, rephrasing the question in various ways, irritation crept across Abdullah Abbas's face. He viewed this insistence as disrespectful. After all, I was there to visit Maulana, and considering his age and health, it felt appropriate not to pressure him into discussing sensitive subjects if he was not feeling up to it.

My connection with Maulana Ali Mian offered a unique benefit: it allowed me to become acquainted with some of the era's most prominent personalities, leaders, and scholars through his intimate gatherings. On one particular occasion, I was given the chance to be part of a meeting of the board's executive committee, thanks to Ali Mian's personal invitation. During that time, I was immersed in preparing a special edition of the magazine. This opportunity marked my initial experience of closely observing, listening to, and engaging in dialogue with the collective leadership of Indian Muslims.
This gathering felt like a cozy, intellectual haven, with the number of participants not exceeding thirty or forty individuals. Notable attendees included Ibrahim Sulaiman Seth, Syed Shahabuddin, Maulana Ali Mian, and Minnatullah Rahmani, each holding positions on the board. On this occasion, Mujahid al-Islam Qasmi delivered a captivating and detailed speech, which seemed to solidify his reputation as an up-and-coming young scholar. Syed Shahabuddin assumed the entire responsibility for drafting the resolution and the memorandum, his hands weaving the words together with care. Once the draft reached completion, Maulana briefly reviewed the resolution. He read it aloud, his voice resonating with passion, approving each point in turn. And so, the executive committee's two-day session drew to a poignant close.

Over those two days, immersed in conversation and camaraderie, I found myself connecting with leaders who had traveled great distances. These chance encounters happened at the dining table or during the casual, intimate moments of a tea break. I couldn't help but be struck by the incredible humility and special affection these leaders of the era had for the younger generation. It was amazing to think that these very individuals were shouldering the responsibility of guiding two hundred million Indian Muslims.

Our discussions began with lively debates, evolving into the meticulous preparation of resolutions, and ultimately reaching a crescendo with a meeting with the Prime Minister and the presentation of our memorandum. As I tried to capture the essence of these experiences and the essence of this national leadership, I scribbled down my observations in the special issue of the Aligarh Magazine, hoping to somehow convey the passion, the energy, and the unwavering dedication that surrounded me during those unforgettable days:

The two-day session of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board was not as large a meeting as the name "All India" would imply, or as I had imagined it to be. The meeting took place in room number 4 of the Western Court, the proposed venue of the session. The corridor was wide and the room was spacious, with a carpeted floor. When I arrived, there were no signs of the meeting. People started arriving after a few minutes: Maulanas, religious leaders, and authorities on Islamic Law, all of whom had been invited. One of the Maulanas, due to his peculiar religious personality, attracted my attention. He was an old man in his early seventies, with a long white beard, a plump figure, and a staff in his right hand. He was Maulana Minnatullah Rahmani, the chief of the Munger seminary and secretary of the Personal Law Board.

I introduced myself to the Maulana, and he, having known my family very well, had a good deal of information about me. We sat together for some time, and I found the Maulana to be very kind. I started discussing the problems of Muslims in India today. To me, the Maulana seemed to be very disappointed with the Muslim community, a man who had lost his hopes and aspirations of giving the community a reorientation.

"Do you not think, Maulana, that the whole Muslim community in India is living in an atmosphere of insecurity, and that this hinders the progress of the community?" My question was sharp and direct.
"You cannot find an immediate solution," said the Maulana. "It is rooted in a thousand years of history of India, and what we are suffering from is the natural outcome of the doings of our ancestors. Is there any way out, Maulana? Can the religious leaders and Ulema not play an effective role, as they did in the past, to restore the glory of Muslim India?"
The Maulana's feelings on this issue were negative.
"Maulana, I think the Ulema can still play an effective role in creating political consciousness among the Muslim masses. They can even, if united, lead the community in the present democratic set up of India."
"No, my dear, you do not have enough experience of the situation. The Muslims of India are bad. They are not reliable. They do not rely on Ulema. Ulema are not so influential. They lie too much. There are too many differences among them. It is a sad story."

The Maulana's answer was cynical, steeped deep in pessimism. My way of direct questioning annoyed the Maulana as I was demanding more from his side and blaming the general masses less. At the end of the discussion, he alleged that we young people do not come to the fore and simply blame one or the other.
"You should come to the fore to solve the problems of the community and guide it on to the path of genuine progress," said the Maulana.
Our discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Maulana Nadvi.
"Maulana, we are losing our distinguished men every day. There is an acute dearth of capable men among us," said a local Delhi Shaikh to Maulana Nadvi.
He was afraid of the future. The present, it seemed to me, was beyond his imagination.

After emerging from the board meeting, I was enveloped by a nagging suspicion that our perception of the collective national leadership for Muslims might just be an alluring illusion or a captivating mirage. The leaders, scattered across their own retreats, shrines, organizations, and seminaries, seem caught in a web of endless organizational and social responsibilities. This tangled mass leaves them gasping for air, struggling to find the time to dissect and evaluate the issues plaguing the community, let alone concoct effective strategies for the future. To

make matters worse, a nationwide organizational structure to execute such plans is conspicuously absent.
In their current predicament, these venerable figures can do little more than hurriedly convene a meeting in the face of an emergency. They can articulate their stance through an assortment of resolutions, memoranda, press statements, and, at the very most, intimate meetings with the Prime Minister. But the burning question lingers: is this approach sufficient to weather the storm of challenges confronting the community? Or must we break free from the confines of these traditional frameworks and embark on a quest for more meaningful and inventive solutions?

Immersed in an ocean of faith, the public rests their hopes upon the shoulders of esteemed religious leaders, despite their human limitations. Eagerly, they dedicate a bounty of resources to momentous gatherings and shower mosques and madrasas with heartfelt generosity. This unyielding belief in the vigilant, selfless, and righteous guidance of these spiritual sentinels colors their world with a sense of divine assurance.
Yet, the responsibility of protecting Sharia weighs heavy on the leaders, as their finite time and resources often limit their endeavors. In this struggle, they find themselves focused on preserving the existing order, rather than embarking on groundbreaking plans or pioneering strategies.
Were the common people to uncover this veiled reality, their perceptions would shift, fostering a more pragmatic understanding of what their respected leaders can genuinely achieve in this transient, imperfect world.

One day, I found myself savoring the blissful warmth of a cup of green label purple tea on my porch when my neighbor, Abdullah Afghani, appeared out of the blue. Enamored by the aromatic purple tea, Abdullah had spent his brighter days studying engineering in Moscow. Now, he devoted his time to completing the education he had left unfinished in Aligarh. Around that time, murmurs of Hindu-Muslim tensions slithered through the city streets. Our conversation naturally

meandered towards the struggles Indian Muslims faced. I lamented, "Unfortunately, there's a lack of unity and joint effort among us. Muslims have no leadership, nor any clear plan of action. We're caught in a downward spiral."

Hearing my words, Abdullah's laughter erupted, filling the air like a playful melody. He insinuated I had fallen into the company of the wrong crowd and advised me to find new friends and maybe even switch newspapers. He went on to share that during his time in Moscow, Russian friends of his had often admired the unity among Afghans, which enabled them to stand up against a military behemoth like Russia. Yet, on the other hand, news from Afghanistan would arrive daily, illustrating how different Mujahideen factions showed no tolerance for other groups within their sphere of influence. Hoping to shed light on the situation, Abdullah told me a Jewish anecdote. The story goes that a Jew had his newspaper vendor deliver an Arab newspaper to his home, much to the shock of his Jewish friends. They questioned why he abandoned the Jewish paper for an Arab one. The man explained that the Jewish newspaper had driven him into a deep depression, with its constant tales of Jewish disunity, threats to Israel's future, and the younger generation distancing themselves from the Torah's teachings. If left unchecked, European and American Jews would lose their identity. The paper even discussed the hesitance of Jewish traders and capitalists to invest in national and communal projects. In contrast, the Arab newspaper showed that Israel surpassed the entire Arab world in technology and military power. Israel's standard of living towered above even the wealthiest Arab countries. Jews controlled global media, garnered most Nobel Prizes, and held significant influence over American policymakers. No American president could win an election without their support. Essentially, the Jews had the world in the palm of their hand. Since turning to the Arab newspaper, the man's life became a kaleidoscope of brilliant hues.

Abdullah's laughter echoed as he walked away, yet my mind was still consumed with worry. The recurring crisis in leadership and the dearth of competent individuals left me pondering. Our focus seems to be on creating followers and devotees instead of fostering future

leaders. To cultivate an upcoming generation of intellectually curious and tenacious young leaders, we need someone who understands the intricacies of leadership and possesses a deep appreciation for its responsibilities.

Presently, our leadership is dominated by hereditary spiritual guides and caretakers, as well as trustees of madrasas and mosques, who have inherited their roles. A spiritual leader is inclined to produce more disciples, but if they were to develop a leader, what would become of their future generations? This conundrum underscores the necessity for innovative thinking and a transformation in our approach to nurturing the leaders our community so urgently requires.

I pondered deeply about who placed those currently in leadership positions - was it the Muslim community or the government? The community appears to have little say in this matter. The government, in many ways, shapes these leaders by engaging with certain individuals, bestowing importance upon them, and presenting them as leaders. Recently, there were indications that the government intended to bring about changes in Muslim leadership, which greatly troubled the board's Secretary-General, Maulana Minnatullah Rahmani. In a thoughtful letter to me, dated January 22, 1986, he delved into this concern:

"The government knows our true strength all too well, yet our ranks are becoming increasingly fragmented. The core strength of the board was meant to be the unity of the entire Muslim community in India, and it is disheartening to see divisions emerge. A group has formed under the name 'Muslim Personal Law Conference,' and efforts are being made to expand it. It's worth contemplating the nature and extent of the government's involvement with this conference.

In these circumstances, we attempted to resolve the issue of Section 125 as swiftly as possible. Conversations took place, and the matter seemed to be settled. At the government's request, the board drafted an amendment to Section 125 and submitted it. This event occurred on

December 23rd. Officials had claimed that the issue would be resolved within days. However, a month has passed, and the government remains silent, as if it has been paralyzed. We now suspect that the entire negotiation was a deception, and we were duped.

In light of this situation, we must expedite the board's work and strive to influence the government."

It appeared that the government wielded considerable influence over the Muslim leadership, accepting a leader when it suited them and establishing a new one when desired. In this context, becoming the leader of the Muslim community was an even more daunting task than walking on a razor's edge. The leader had to strike a delicate balance between being acceptable to the government while maintaining the trust and confidence of the Muslim community. This precarious situation made it increasingly difficult for the Muslim leadership to uphold its own dignity and effectively serve the community.

32

The Path of Passion's Traveler

On a delightful November morning, as the sun gently caressed my face, I found myself savoring a cup of tea in the balcony of my room at Qidwai Hostel. Little did I know that my tranquil solitude would soon be disrupted. A messenger from Vice-Chancellor Syed Hamid appeared, bearing news that I was urgently summoned to the Dean of Students Welfare (DSW) office.

The memories of the previous year's expulsion from the hostel following the incidents at Habib Hall still haunted me. I couldn't help but feel a sense of dread as I made my way to the DSW office, wondering what new storm was brewing. But as fate would have it, I crossed paths with Assistant Dean Shamsuddin, whose warm greeting alleviated my fears.

He informed me of an international conference for young editors in Karachi, a collaboration between UNESCO and the Hamdard Foundation. The Vice-Chancellor saw something in me and wished for me to represent the university at this prestigious event. Feeling both honored and excited, I seized the opportunity, promptly notifying the Hamdard Foundation of my intent to attend.

However, life has a way of throwing curveballs, and this was no exception. The obstacle that lay before me was the absence of a passport, an item that, in those days, proved to be quite the challenge to obtain.

During those days, the passport office was nestled in the bustling Shastri Bhavan. Upon arrival, I was met with seemingly endless lines and a disordered atmosphere, my spirits momentarily dampened. However, I clung to hope. When it was finally my turn, I realized that securing a passport was not a swift endeavor, but a drawn-out journey filled with numerous required documents. I persevered until the

afternoon, ultimately encountering the passport officer. Observing my crestfallen expression, he appeared to sympathize with my situation. He carefully reviewed the conference-related documents and offered a potential resolution: if I could acquire a letter of endorsement from a gazetted officer or a member of parliament, things could fall into place.

As the phrase "member of parliament" echoed in my thoughts, Ibrahim Suleiman Seth's name materialized—a name I had seen inscribed in elegant Urdu on a nearby sign. I hastily retrieved the file from the passport officer and dashed to Seth's residence just across the street. After ringing the doorbell, Seth himself answered the door. I elucidated my pressing predicament, and without any reservations, he completed the necessary sections and affixed the essential stamps. Additionally, he provided a separate letter addressed to the passport officer, replete with praise on my behalf. When I presented the letter to the passport officer a short thirty minutes later, he gazed at me in amazement. He asked, "How did you manage to pull this off so quickly?" Nonetheless, he advised me to wait until five o'clock, at which time my passport would be prepared.

With hopeful anticipation, I had imagined the conference staff, eagerly poised at Karachi Airport, ready to embrace me upon my arrival. Yet, fate had its own design. Touching down, I was struck by the revelation that the conference was not to be; it had been postponed, and word of this turn of events had fluttered to our university by way of telex. Alas, having embarked on my pilgrimage to Aligarh days prior, seeking to prepare myself for the imminent intellectual gathering, I had been left uninformed. But what recourse remained? In quiet contemplation, I mused: the absence of the conference still bore witness to the journey undertaken. For it is within the journey itself that we find life's true marrow, a sentiment echoed by those sage souls who have christened the journey as a vessel for victory. In truth, the ultimate aspiration ought to be the journey, for the destination serves only as a monument to inertia. As the poet once so exquisitely penned:

"Passion's traveler thou art, shun the embrace of an end,

Though Laila be your partner, don't let the journey suspend."[xxx]

Our gracious hosts, attuned to my unique curiosities, had thoughtfully curated an enriching itinerary for me, spanning four to five days. It encompassed a whirlwind of experiences, from exploring government and semi-government institutions, to wandering historical sites, engaging in stimulating discourse with esteemed intellectuals, and partaking in collective meetings with eager students and faculty at Karachi University. The Karachi Development Authority's chief, an old Alig at heart, had orchestrated a gathering with his close-knit circle of friends, where the air buzzed with their ardent desire to delve into the intricate details of Aligarh. They queried whether Shamshad Market still saw students congregate as they once did, if melodies continued to emanate from gramophones in the same nostalgic manner, and how Café de Phoos had fared over time. Their numerous questions evoked the sense that this generation of old Aligs was on a quest to rediscover the Aligarh of their own era.

As the haze of nostalgia began to dissipate, the conversation veered towards more somber topics. A gentleman, likely named Nizami, posed a series of questions, his voice tinged with concern. "I've heard whispers of the university's minority character being restored. Would this truly yield any benefits, or are we merely being fed hollow words?" Before I could muster a response, another gentleman chimed in, his tone resolute, "The crux of the matter isn't rooted in law, dear friend, but rather in intent. Had these unfortunate souls possessed the right intentions, would Pakistan have even come into existence?"

I offered my perspective, suggesting that the restoration of the minority character had, at the very least, granted Muslims a semblance of psychological and emotional solace. From a legal standpoint, Parliament had endowed the university with the authority to undertake efficacious measures for the educational and cultural upliftment of Muslims throughout India. In essence, the government

had recognized and embraced Aligarh's traditional role in Muslim India.

"That's a rather significant development," he mused, as a curious glint sparked in his eyes. "Yes, indeed," I agreed, feeling the weight of the matter. "As a proactive measure, the university has even established a dedicated institution called the 'Center for the Promotion of Educational and Cultural Advancement of Muslims of India.' However, the challenge lies in securing the additional funds necessary for such an ambitious endeavor. Meaningful progress can only be made if a sense of peace and order prevails within the university. Ever since the new amendment act has been introduced, the university has been entangled in a tumultuous struggle between Islam and kufr. It's of the utmost importance for this conflict to subside before we can genuinely focus on the task at hand." I tried to wrap my words around the complexities of the situation, hoping to convey its essence.

He commented, "The struggle between Islam and disbelief continues there. We had similar disputes during our time. Back then, the leadership of the communists was held by Professor Muhammad Habib, a historian, while Pro Vice-Chancellor Yousuf Hussain Khan steered Aligarh's traditionalist thought. There was a significant uproar against some controversial appointments in the history department."

"Muhammad Mujib of Jamia Millia Islamia was their brother, wasn't he?" someone asked.

I replied, "Yes, and the individual currently advocating Marxism at Aligarh is none other than Professor Habib's son."

"Fascinating! I had no idea," he said, intrigued. "The era of the descendants has arrived. The same turmoil, the same conflicts, the same Islam, the same disbelief—Aligarh is indeed a unique world. In our day, Yawar Jang served as the Vice-Chancellor. For some unknown reason, he decided to reduce the reserved seats for internal students in the medical college from seventy-five percent to fifty

percent. Many people attempted to persuade him, explaining that this would further reduce the number of Muslim students, but he remained steadfast. A substantial uproar ensued. In truth, he had the support of Abdul Karim Chagla, who was the Federal Minister of Education at that time."One of the fellows chimed in, "Chagla, wasn't he part of the old League?"

I responded, "Indeed, but when he unmasked his genuine secular self, he morphed into a rather treacherous figure. Chagla dispatched Yawar Jang to Aligarh, aiming to estrange the university from its time-honored customs, akin to the transformation of Osmania University. You may be cognizant of the fact that during the police action in Hyderabad, Yawar Jang held the position of Vice-Chancellor at Osmania University. He had arrived at Aligarh under Chagla's directive. Utilizing an ordinance, Chagla managed to undermine the significance of the university court. He went so far as to declare that, being a government-established institution, the university was exempt from Article 30 of the Constitution, which assured protection for minority institutions. Providentially, Dr. Mahmood from Aligarh rose in defense of the university. Although he was both an Aligarh graduate and a Congress member, he valued his loyalty to the university over his allegiance to Congress when it came to safeguarding Aligarh. He managed to bring together various Muslim factions under the umbrella of the Muslim Majlis Mashawarat. Nizami Sahib, it is truly remarkable that a Congress loyalist like Syed Mahmood found himself compelled to assume the mantle of a guardian in his twilight years to rescue Aligarh. It was as though Muslims were once again forced to wage a battle for their freedom in an independent India."

After our meeting concluded, the distinguished Aligarh alumni walked with me to my car to say their goodbyes. One gentleman, brimming with affection, held my hand and said, "Aligarh is our last hope, our collective legacy. Please treasure and safeguard it. Without it, we feel a sense of rootlessness here." As he spoke, tears filled his eyes. Hands were raised in farewell, and our car moved forward.

33

J is for Jihad

Our next stop was Lahore, where our return to Delhi was scheduled in a few short days. However, the vibrant scenes in Lahore only served to stoke my wanderlust even further. Upon arriving in Mansoora to meet the esteemed Naeem Siddiqui Sahab, I was struck by the sight of young men armed with Kalashnikov rifles, all seemingly enjoying themselves in their lively camaraderie.

In every place, from guest houses and mosques to verdant fields and administrative offices, their presence suggested that the Islamic movement had entered a new phase—one of armed conflict. My understanding of the Afghan jihad had previously been limited to newspapers and magazines, but now, witnessing so many weapons in the hands of these passionate youths, the concept of jihad seemed to take on a certain romantic hue.

The vision of a sovereign Muslim state within the subcontinent began to dance before my eyes, and I couldn't help but feel sorrowful for my own disconnection from this momentous reality. I wondered about the world I was living in, during an era when the armed struggle for the global dominance of Islam had begun, and I, somehow, had no part to play in this vital endeavor.

As the days passed, I found myself immersed in conversations with jihadist leaders. Our discussions took place over meals at the guesthouse or in the mosque courtyard. One evening, after Isha prayers, I was heading back to my room when my gaze fell upon my neighbor, Ramadan Muradov, who was also returning to his quarters after a long day. Though our paths had crossed before, we hadn't been formally introduced. That night, he took the initiative and invited me to join him for tea.

As we delved into conversation, I discovered that Muradov hailed from Chechnya and worked as a journalist. He primarily resided in Islamabad and held a deep interest in the Afghan jihad. Spotting the latest issue of the Arabic magazine Al-Jihad in his possession, I inquired about his thoughts on the situation. "Do you really believe the Red Army is losing heart?" I asked. He replied, "There's no doubt that the Soviet Union's approach to the Afghan war is changing. The Russians are no longer willing to prolong this conflict. In this sense, it should be regarded as a victory for the mujahideen. However, the real challenge lies not in the war itself, but in the potential victory that may follow, for which we are woefully unprepared."

"After the war? What's the meaning of that? There will be a liberated Islamic state where the Mujahideen will outline a collective lifestyle based on mutual consultation."

He replied, "There's an endearing naivety in your words. If only real life were as straightforward."

I responded, "Many individuals predict future internal conflicts in Afghanistan due to the existing rivalries among the Mujahideen. This perspective is rather bleak, and we should move beyond it."

He said, "I'm not discussing that particular danger; my anguish lies elsewhere. We, as a people, have zealously promoted the Afghan Jihad as an unadulterated Islamic struggle, considering it an individual obligation. It has reached the point where it's claimed that this Jihad is compulsory for the entire Muslim community. Now the situation is such that impassioned youth from different countries, brimming with the desire for martyrdom, are arriving in large numbers to partake in this battle. They see Afghanistan as the Medina of our time. Once the Jihad ends and America ceases its backing, what will become of this ideal of Jihad based on Islamic brotherhood? Where will those who view this Jihad as an individual obligation go?"

"Why trouble yourself with thoughts of the future? Could it not be that a liberated Afghanistan might serve as the starting point for a new global resurgence?"

He replied, "Ah, the innocence of your words is charming, filled with desire and passion; but perhaps they lack a touch of realism. Allow me to offer a different angle." He flipped through the pages of Al-Jihad magazine and pointed to a column titled "Lovers of the Houris," continuing, "Behold the tale of a Mujahid. One would think, reading this, that divine favor showers upon the Mujahideen in this conflict. The bodies of martyrs emit fragrances of musk, amber, and castorium. These scents alone reveal the proximity of a martyr's remains. When bombing planes approach, a gathering of birds assembles like a celestial veil, obstructing their view of the target. Sometimes, these avian wonders employ their invisible strength to halt the bombs midair. During such battles, people have claimed to see angels descending from the heavens, fighting side by side with the Mujahideen on horseback against their foes. The author of this piece has also penned a book and serves as this magazine's editor. You might know him: Abdullah Azzam. Do peruse his book on the miracles and divine blessings that manifest during the Jihad. These accounts, based on the testimonies of various witnesses, have been gathered within his tome. One story, if memory serves me right, is about a martyr named Ibn Jannat. After several days, his body was exhumed to be transferred to his family's burial grounds. Legend has it that the young man's father spoke to the lifeless form, imploring, 'Son! If you were indeed martyred in God's name, grant me a sign to assure me that your sacrifice has been accepted.' Upon hearing this, movement stirred within the body of the martyr, who saluted his father, reached out for a handshake, and clasped his father's hand for nearly fifteen minutes. The storyteller swears to have seen this event with his own eyes. Tales such as these have undoubtedly stoked the flames of the Afghan Jihad, but we failed to consider the potential repercussions on the very foundations of our concept of martyrdom."

I must say, I wasn't expecting such tales. Scholars have written about these events within the fervor of their beliefs in Jihad. To my understanding, Abdullah Azzam represents the Salafi-Jihadi and Ikhwanist camp. It's surprising that they emphasize these miraculous incidents.

He shared: This is just a single example, but when one reads their writings or listens to their speeches, it feels as if the Afghan situation holds utmost importance, even in the celestial assembly. God seems determined to bestow victory upon the Mujahideen, no matter the cost. They've written about numerous accounts where bullets hit Mujahideen fighters but failed to inflict any damage. Tanks rolled over them, but not even a hair was harmed. A shocking 300 Napalm bombs were dropped upon their ranks, yet, miraculously, not a single one detonated. One tale tells of a martyr who, even in death, refused to loosen his grip on his Kalashnikov. People tried in vain to remove the weapon from his hand, but it was only when his father reminded him that it belonged to the Mujahideen that he finally let go. From the body of another martyr, a radiant beam of light was observed stretching from the earth all the way to the heavens. These stories aim to illustrate that the Afghan Jihad is a divine undertaking, blessed with God's unparalleled support and endorsement. But if the real world fails to deliver the sought-after results, the implications will be twofold: not only will the approach and methods of Jihad shift, but our trust in God may also waver.

Yet, this represents just one person's perspective. How could one possibly apply it to the entire breadth of the Jihad? I attempted, perhaps with a hint of futility, to extricate the Afghan Jihad from the intellectual grip of Abdullah Azzam's ideas.

He responded: Azzam is not simply an isolated individual, nor is he merely a symbol of an organization or a school of thought. Within the context of the Afghan Jihad, he holds the esteemed title of the "Father of Jihad." In theory, he is seen as the guiding light for all Mujahideen,

and the truth is that he played a crucial role in transforming the Afghan Jihad into a worldwide Islamic cause. As he said this, he picked a book from his desk and handed it to me, proclaiming, "This is the book that has achieved the status of the theoretical Bible for this Jihad."

I took a fleeting look at the book's title page, discovering that it was a translation of an Arabic masterpiece. The original title elegantly read: الدفاع عن أراضي المسلمين أهم فروض الأعيان (The Defense of Muslim Lands is the Foremost Individual Obligation). The book, stretching over 133 pages, housed a 79-page fatwa, passionately arguing that scholars from past to present have all agreed: when even the tiniest fragment of Dar al-Islam (Islamic territory) falls prey to an invader, Jihad blossoms into an individual obligation for Muslims of every gender. In such heart-wrenching times, sons need not seek their fathers' permission, nor must wives await their husbands' approval. Azzam's powerful fatwa had drawn the admiration and support of the era's luminary scholars. Among its endorsers were the venerable Sheikh Ibn Baz and Sheikh Uthaymeen from Saudi Arabia, the esteemed Sheikh Muneer from Egypt, the influential Sheikh Omar Saif from Yemen, and a myriad of other distinguished scholars.

I had come across the name Abdullah Azzam a number of times, but I hadn't grasped the profound role he played in shaping the ideological framework of jihad. As I pondered, I couldn't help but think, "When so many esteemed scholars of our time stand united in their belief that this jihad is a personal obligation, could it be possible that we are moving forward, guided by some divine blueprint? Perhaps Afghanistan is paving the way for a renaissance of Islam in the future. It's as if the universe is whispering that we are meant to bring about this monumental change with our own hands."

He sighed, "I wish what you were saying were true. Our unity in the ranks, the tales of miracles and blessings that emerge from the battlefield, and most importantly, organizing a duty like jihad on an

international level – all of this seems to have more American backing than divine approval."

"But perhaps this American involvement is a part of some divine scheme, don't you think?" I suggested.

Muradov chuckled, a sardonic smile playing on his lips. "Yeah, it's definitely a matter of strategic partnership. We're in some cosmic dance with America, who has sought our assistance to weaken their enemy. We're just trying to make the best of the situation. The problem arises when we start to regard this war as something sacred, something holy. Recounting miracles and blessings may provide a temporary boost in morale, but these illusions slowly shake the foundations of our theological beliefs. Today, we've turned a communal obligation into an individual one. We've labeled Palestine and Afghanistan as the lands of jihad, and since Afghanistan provides an open space and international backing for the mujahideen to gather, we've put the Afghan conflict on a pedestal above Palestine. However, when the war ends and America inevitably withdraws its support, maintaining our conviction in this war as a personal obligation will become increasingly difficult. The landscape of war is ever-changing, like the ebb and flow of tides in the vast ocean. Today, we find ourselves in the company of America, but who's to say that tomorrow, another alliance won't be forged in the name of self-interest? However, the sands of our beliefs should not shift so easily with the winds of circumstance. A responsibility that is personal today cannot simply transform into a collective burden once America's guiding hand is withdrawn. If we fail to truly grasp these nuances, we may find ourselves adrift in a sea of uncertainty when the war ends, and the once open doors to promoting Jihad across the globe close. The echo of impassioned speeches in support of the Afghan Jihad in American and European cities will fall silent, and we may feel the weight of despair and exclusion settling upon the global Islamic movement, like a heavy fog rolling in.

The night had grown long, and the veil of darkness enveloped us in a cloak of mysteries. I said my goodbyes to the enigmatic Ramzan Muradov. I couldn't help but wonder if he was caught in the web of unfounded paranoia. Those who pushed back the formidable Red Army with nothing but their unyielding passion for martyrdom would surely find a solution to their predicament, even without the support of the United States. And yet, it remained a puzzle why America, perceived as the Great Satan by Iranian clerics and challenged by an Islamic movement in Iran, had become the champion, defender, and ally of the Islamic Jihad in Afghanistan. Did Muradov's words carry the weight of truth? Were we unwittingly serving as mere pawns to further American interests and perpetuate their global dominance?

A thought fluttered through my mind, like a butterfly alighting on a blooming flower: seeing is indeed believing. Why not witness the reality with my own eyes? I had heard tales of Peshawar, a city not far from the Khyber Pass, teeming with Afghan refugee camps, Mujahideen training facilities, and administrative offices. Even representatives from the international press found themselves drawn to this enigmatic city, as if by some unseen force. The doors to offices and guesthouses throughout the city stood open, welcoming foreign Mujahideen from every corner of the world. So why not journey to Peshawar?

Yet, I was beset with a conundrum. I had already committed to embarking on a research-oriented and educational sojourn to Balakot the following morning, an excursion orchestrated through the gracious benevolence of Naeem Siddiqui.

One day, I found myself presenting two letters from Maulana Maududi to Mr. Naeem Siddiqui. In one of these letters, addressed to my dear Uncle Hasnain Syed, Maulana Maududi wrote about their twenty-six-year long journey, striving to transform Pakistan into a Dar al-Islam, an abode of peace. It seemed as though the moment to realize this dream was finally within reach. He extended an invitation to my

uncle to visit and experience the full honor of being welcomed into Dar al-Islam.

Upon reading the letter, Naeem Siddiqui sighed and said, "Yes, there was a time when Maulana harbored hope."

Naeem Sahib, a family friend of sorts, had his book "Islam ka Mutalba-e-Haq" (Islam Demanding its Rights) published by my father's bookstore in the days preceding the partition. Despite my occasional over-enthusiasm and inexperience, he consistently showered me with selfless affection, even when my words inadvertently critiqued the Jamaat to which he had devoted his life.

Upon the publication of my first book, "Ghalba-e-Islam," Naeem Sahib shared his thoughts in his monthly magazine, "Tarjumanul Quran." He penned, "Rashid Shaz is an extraordinarily intelligent young man whose thirst for knowledge was cultivated in the intellectually stimulating environs of Aligarh University. He dives deep into complex ideas, composing potent and unflinching articles ... Yet, Rashid Shaz acts as a stringent adjudicator, ensuring that none can evade the scope of his scrutiny." (Tarjumanul Quran, Volume 109, Issue 3)

Our conversation meandered towards the history of the Islamic movement in the Indian subcontinent, evoking memories of the martyrs of Balakot. Perhaps sensing my growing eagerness, he picked up a piece of paper from the table and wrote:

"Brother Abdul Hadi, our cherished Rashid Shaz has come from India, seeking the path to Balakot. Please guide him on the journey and prepare him for the weather that awaits."

And so, with anticipation and curiosity, I prepared for the journey ahead, seeking answers to the questions that lingered in my heart and soul.

This slip of paper served as my passport to Balakot. When I arrived, I discovered that my impending visit had already caused a stir. The cold was biting, and it felt as if the wind was seeping into my very soul. We reached the central mosque just before Maghrib prayers, located beside a river where people performed their ablutions using water from a nearby hot spring. During the prayers, an announcement was made that a young researcher and traveler, committed to the same noble cause, was present among them.

Addressing such a large gathering so suddenly was a daunting task for me, but by the grace of the divine, I managed to rise to the occasion. The following day, as I visited historical sites and remnants, I found myself at the graves of Syed Ahmad Shaheed and Ismail Shaheed. Upon seeing the humble and desolate graves adorned with prayer threads and vibrant flags of supplication, memories of Moulvi Kufr Tor flooded my mind. He was one of Syed Sahib's close associates and had lived to the very end. It was said that he was so fervent about abolishing polytheism and innovation that wherever he saw an Imam Bara, a venue for holding Ta'ziya, or a grave with prayer threads and supplication flags on a tree, he would strike it with the iron tip of his staff, not resting until it was destroyed. It was this unyielding passion for eradicating polytheism and innovation that earned him the moniker Moulvi Kufrr Tor.

Despite their unwavering dedication, the Mujahideen movement found itself mired in internal conflicts and unattainable objectives. When I shared my critical reflections on this journey with the venerable Maulana Ali Mian, he offered a kind smile and advised me, with utmost grace, that simply becoming an encyclopedia of Islamic movements would not be enough; I needed to prepare myself for the practical field as well.

In that period, I provided some insight into the reasons behind the Mujahideen movement's failures, as follows:

One clear reason that the members of the movement were likely aware of is the error in identifying the true enemy in their struggle for Islamic dominance. The works of Shah Waliullah and Shah Ismail often emphasize that the main obstacle in establishing an Islamic system was the British, who rapidly expanded their power and control over India. During Syed Sahib's time, Delhi had already fallen under British influence, and the decline of Muslim political power was felt by everyone.

Syed Sahib understood that the crucial battle would be against the British, and that's why he went as far as the border in search of Madinah al-Islam. However, when viewed from this perspective, his preparations to confront such a formidable power were severely lacking. There were inadequate efforts to comprehend the foundations of this encroaching civilization, akin to a torrential flood, and how to effectively strike at its roots… It is certainly not the way of Allah's friends to face an enemy equipped with a wide array of modern weapons, including advanced missiles, fighter planes, and deadly bombs, while we stand armed only with sticks, driven by the fervor of faith.

(Rashid Shaz, Ghalba-e-Islam, Aligarh, 1987, pp. 31-32)

During those times, a palpable sense of anticipation enveloped the world of Islam, as if the arrival of a new dawn was imminent. Iran had dealt a crushing blow to the so-called "Great Satan" America, while in Afghanistan, the valiant mujahideen had forced the mighty Soviet forces to their knees. I found myself inspired to pen a comprehensive 300-page book called 'A Hand-book of Islamic Revival', which passionately advocated for the adoption of various well-known tactics, ranging from the democratic process to military uprisings. The esteemed and kind-hearted Muhammad Salahuddin, the enigmatic editor of 'Takbir International' in Karachi, was to oversee the publication of my work. Tragically, a series of violent attacks and arson

incidents targeting his office thwarted these plans, and in just a few short years, he too would join the ranks of the martyrs.

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With a heart and mind brimming with the romantic vision of revolution's dawn, I found myself in Peshawar, which had become the pulsating heart of global jihad at that time. Lunch awaited me at a mujahideen camp nestled on the city's outskirts. Young men stood vigilant at various checkpoints, their gazes unwavering.

The afternoon prayer unfolded in the basement of a seemingly temporary building, as if caught between construction or perhaps merely embracing the makeshift nature of these camps. The air was crisp, chilled. As the armed mujahideen laid their weapons before them in reverence, the atmosphere seemed to whisper:

Not in a mosque nor beneath the walls of the Divine's abode, The prayer of love is offered in the shadows cast by swords.

In those days, Yusuf Islam's song "Afghanistan is Islam" was capturing hearts and minds. Having recently transitioned from Cat Stevens to Yusuf Islam, the famed Western singer's embrace of Islam was a notable event. As he depicted Islam as intertwined with Afghanistan, it seemed as though the very essence of Islam was inextricably linked to the Afghan jihad. This sentiment resonated from East to West, sparking a wave of excitement surrounding the Afghan jihad. Amidst this romantic fervor, rational analysis and evaluations found themselves with scant space to exist.

In my wanderings through these camps, my eyes were drawn to the wide-eyed, guileless children, finding sanctuary with their frayed families, now absorbing lessons in makeshift schools for refugees. There wasn't a single child untouched by the merciless grasp of war. Countless children were orphaned, and women left widowed. Their world's metamorphosis, stark and jarring, was reflected in the novel curriculum devised for learning the alphabet within these camps: 'A'

for Allah, the singular divine; 'B' for Baba, who journeys to the mosque; 'P' for Panj, the quintessential pillars of Islam; 'T' for tufang (rifle), procured by the mujahideen; 'J' for Jihad, an obligatory quest, as Baba embarked on it; 'D' for Deen, our faith, Islam. Even the mathematics books couldn't help but incorporate images of weaponry to instruct in the art of addition and subtraction. Young minds were challenged to solve dilemmas like, "If ten Russian infidels faced an assault and five met their end, how many remain?" During that era, the psychological repercussions of such pedagogy went unnoticed, for we were enthralled by the intensity of jihad. Only later did it come to light that these books had been orchestrated and dispatched from the distant shores of America.

Over time, it was revealed that American Senator Charlie Wilson, driven by an insatiable desire for vengeance for the Vietnam War, sought to fan the flames of conflict in Afghanistan. As the grim tally of twenty-five thousand Russian soldiers met their end, Wilson reflected that in Vietnam, fifty-eight thousand American soldiers had perished. The outstanding balance of thirty-three thousand lives had yet to be settled. He longed to battle the Russians to the very last Afghan, sparing no effort. It was murmured that only after claiming the lives of two million Afghans would Russia ultimately withdraw; otherwise, America was resolute in sustaining the jihad until the final breath of the last Afghan Muslim.

Meandering through these camps, the fear and despair etched on the faces of innocent children unveiled the hidden pain and anguish lurking behind the anthem of jihad. My heart wrenched upon witnessing the squalid conditions these forsaken souls endured, and I was left to contemplate the unfathomable state of affairs just across the border, where even then, the relentless deluge of bombs persisted.

Villages morphed into graveyards, cities crumbled into ruins, and innumerable families found themselves compelled into lives of displacement and homelessness. A million souls had already been

ensnared in the war's merciless grip, but the true count of the disabled, the widows, and the orphaned children remained a mystery. It was as though an entire nation had been laid to waste, and yet, despite the overwhelming devastation, we continued to teach our children 'T' for tufang (rifle) and 'J' for jihad in accordance with the American curriculum.

The following morning was reserved for an encounter with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the enigmatic leader of the Islamic Party. As the first light of dawn was beginning to seep through the darkness, our gracious host stirred us from our slumber. Shortly thereafter, we found ourselves in a sprawling compound nestled on the city's periphery, where, for the moment, only a handful of young security guards armed with Kalashnikovs stood watch.

I was ushered into the meeting room, where an array of newspapers and magazines lay haphazardly strewn across the table. My attention was drawn to the cover of National Geographic, which featured a haunting photograph of an Afghan refugee girl, Sharbat Gula. Her eyes, wide and innocent, betrayed the unspeakable horrors she had witnessed. This image would eventually become a poignant symbol of the vulnerability and anguish experienced by Afghan refugees.

As I absentmindedly flipped through the pages of the magazine, a sudden flurry of activity disrupted the previously serene atmosphere of the compound. A procession of three imposing, gold-tinted armored vehicles rumbled into the compound. As the vehicles came to a halt, armed security personnel poured out and swiftly took up positions throughout the area. A handful of young guards erected a two-tiered barricade between the vehicles and the meeting room. It was then that Hekmatyar emerged, his green turban adorned with striking golden stripes. He greeted me with unbridled warmth and enthusiasm.

In the midst of our conversation, they revealed the unblemished Islamic core of the Afghan jihad and the crucial role of Hizb-e-Islami. Their eyes danced with hope, illuminating the path towards a brighter

future. Yet as disagreements and tensions continued to fester among the Afghan factions, my thoughts were deemed insignificant, discarded like yesterday's newspaper.

Maybe, just maybe, they believed that in the throes of war, it wasn't the right time to pick apart such delicate matters.

As we spoke for an hour, I couldn't help but see Hikmatyar as an ingenious strategist with a heart that overflowed with kindness. They understood that America and other Western powers were offering support in their jihad. However, they remained acutely aware of the discord between their own Afghan Islamic vision and the American agenda.

Nasser Bagh, home to the blue-eyed girl, had an air of mystique during those days. Prominent figures from the world over, East and West alike, cherished their presence there as if it were divine intervention. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher would grace us with her presence, assuring the Afghans that "the hearts of the free world are with you," and the atmosphere would reverberate with fervent cries of "Allahu Akbar." At other times, American President Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State George Shultz, and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger would visit, igniting a fire in our souls for the cause of jihad. Upon hearing Vice President Bush's words of goodwill for the mujahideen, our hearts would swell with pride.

Sometimes the Japanese Prime Minister would pay a visit to the camp, and at other times, Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal and Saudi ruler King Khalid would arrive to lift the spirits of the mujahideen. Those were the days when our jihad's trailblazing leaders were the likes of Carter, Reagan, Thatcher, and Bush. Our Friday sermon leaders would passionately decry the Russians, the Chinese, and others while extolling our Western allies with equal fervor. Who could have foreseen that in the days to follow, these same Western jihadist commanders – who now proudly stand alongside the mujahideen for commemorative photographs – would pull away their support so

abruptly that our jihad would be branded as terrorism, and our longing for martyrdom deemed an unforgivable transgression?

34

Beguwa Soup

It had been a decade since my journey to Peshawar, with the war in Bosnia now a distant memory. Life had started to regain a semblance of normalcy after the Dayton Agreement. I found myself staying at the Islamic Center in Zagreb after attending a peace conference, where I encountered a former Arab-origin mujahid, Abdul Rahman. With his bright eyes, wide forehead, and curls cascading over his shoulders, he seemed to be in his mid-thirties.

A quaint market had been established outside the center, where Bosnian women were peddling a variety of food items. I couldn't help but be captivated by the large pieces of dried meat. My mind wandered to the possibility of these chunks finding their way into our evening meal of Begova Čorba, a traditional Bosnian soup. I even thought about the meatballs that had traveled to the Balkans and evolved into the local dish known as ćufta – maybe this very dried meat was a key ingredient.

Noticing my intrigue, a young Arab man stepped forward to satisfy my curiosity. He explained that the meat was smoked, prepared at a specific temperature that allowed it to be preserved and used for several days. Our conversation meandered, and I learned that this group of Bosnian refugees was preparing to embark on their journey back to Sarajevo. Initially, I assumed Abdul Rahman was a Bosnian Muslim, as his complexion appeared somewhat lighter compared to most Arabs. However, as our exchange unfolded, his English accent betrayed his Arab heritage. I discovered that he was a Syrian-Saudi who had ventured away from home twelve years earlier to participate in the Afghan jihad. That experience had so profoundly altered the trajectory of his life that the prospect of returning home and resuming a normal life was forever lost to him.
I asked him, "Your name wouldn't happen to be Abdul Rahman Al-

Dosari, would it?" His face suddenly brightened, and with a smile, he responded, "How on earth did you come to know Dosari?"

I mentioned that I had stumbled upon some tidbits about him in the media's labyrinth.

He replied with a reminiscent air, "Ah yes, he is among my circle of friends. We journeyed together in Afghanistan, and when the winds of change blew, we found ourselves here."

Intrigued, I inquired, "What path lies ahead for you now?"

He sighed, "Now, we're caught in a struggle for survival. Bosnia has become stifling for us. You must have caught whispers of the Dayton Agreement. One of the pivotal conditions for the ceasefire is the expulsion of foreign mujahideen from the lands of Bosnia."

Curious, I asked, "How have you managed to linger here so far?"

He elaborated, "A handful of individuals have forged bonds with local women through marriage, slipping under the radar of Western intelligence agencies and remaining concealed from the media's ever-watchful eye. These are the souls who have stayed. Among them are a few who have been painted as dangerous terrorists by the Western media. These unfortunate beings now find themselves entwined in a legal battle for the right to remain. One of them is our friend Dosari, now known as Abu Abdul Aziz. Another is a man called Abu Hamza, a native of Syria. The Western media has erroneously mingled his identity with Abu Hamza Al-Masri. Consequently, the foreboding image of Abu Hamza has been unfairly thrust upon Abu Hamza Al-Suri. Time will unveil what the future holds for us all."

As we conversed for a brief moment, I noticed the light in Abdul Rahman's eyes start to dim, replaced by a somber intensity. This change was particularly apparent when he realized I had been to this very center in Zagreb a couple of years prior, participating in a peace conference orchestrated by an organization committed to ending the

war. In those days, the center was a refuge for disarrayed Bosnian Muslims, including heartbroken orphans and widowed women still grappling with their losses, their cries and sobs permeating the air, creating an atmosphere heavy with sorrow and upheaval. Our conversation seemed to unlock the doors of Abdul Rahman's memories, breathing life into the past that had laid dormant within him.

He said, "You've stirred up memories from a different time. It was the season of jihad, and we were all consumed by the passion for martyrdom. The Arab Brigade (El-Mudzahidin) was highly esteemed during that period. The mere mention of our name would send shivers down the spines of Serbs and Croats. Picture this: sixty thousand American soldiers had their naval fleet moored along the coasts of Croatia and Serbia, but they lacked the courage to set foot on land. Meanwhile, there were likely no more than six thousand Arab mujahideen in Bosnia. The truth is, we fought with death in mind, with martyrdom as our ultimate aspiration, whereas our adversaries fought to preserve their lives. In those days, just the sight of an Arab mujahideen dressed in black would send our enemies into a panic."

"Black attire! What do you mean? Did the Arab mujahideen undergo some sort of Black Commando training?" I inquired.

He responded, "Not exactly. From the outset, our unit had chosen to don black uniforms. You see, we had come back from the fringes of Afghanistan, having defeated the Red Army. Our spirits soared, our morale was unparalleled."

I inquired, "How many Arab mujahideen were martyred in Bosnia?"

He responded, "Our martyrs' count wouldn't surpass three to four hundred. Just our name alone was enough to evoke terror in the hearts of our enemies."

"And now, after the war's conclusion, how do you feel? Or, if I were to ask what you've gained and lost throughout this whole experience, what would be your response?"

Upon hearing my question, he paused momentarily. He closed his eyes, cupping his face with both hands, as though searching for a pivotal thought. Then he spoke, "For months now, this question has haunted me. It's not merely my personal concern; it's a matter that demands serious introspection for the entire Islamic movement. At times, I marvel at how a student from the University of Malik Saud could progress through various stages of passion for jihad and ultimately reach a point where the Islamic world no longer requires his jihadist actions, and where he himself is regarded by mainstream Islamic movements as an antiquated and superfluous element. The land stretching from Afghanistan to Bosnia would become suffocating for them." Abdul Rahman's voice trembled with emotion as he spoke. I contemplated the notion that Abdul Rahman personifies the core of the Islamic movement. He has undergone a priceless experience. Why not listen and learn from his personal insights? It might just be the key to more easily rediscovering the lost paths of the contemporary Islamic movement, cast in a new light.

I inquired, with a hint of trepidation: How did the notion of venturing to Afghanistan first germinate in your mind? Surely, for a student, this choice must've been fraught with difficulty. He responded, a faraway glimmer in his eyes: The year was 1983. My exams had drawn to a close, and I found myself dwelling in Jeddah during the sweltering summer respite. In those halcyon days, murmurs of the Afghan Jihad circulated like wildfire. In their fervor and curiosity, groups of youths had embarked upon pilgrimages to Peshawar. Through their narratives, it became apparent that Peshawar had blossomed into the "City of Jihad." Mujahideen from all corners of the earth congregated there, with branches of the Maktab al-Khidmat lil Mujahideen (Services Office for Mujahideen) proliferating like verdant vines. The air reverberated with the impassioned anthems of jihad, and the people

brimmed with enthusiasm for the cause. Tales of miracles and wonders from the battlefield trickled in without end, evoking an aura reminiscent of the Companions' days.

Contemplating the proximity of Peshawar, I thought, "Why not witness this grand twentieth-century battlefield with my very own eyes?" Thus, I embarked on a journey that could be deemed a sort of "jihad tourism." At its inception, my quest was driven by exploration, curiosity, and a yearning to set foot on the sacred soil of jihad. Fate, however, had other plans.

One fateful day, I found myself in the presence of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam as he delivered his Friday sermon. Little could I have anticipated the profound impact his words would have on my soul. His speech painted a vivid picture of Afghanistan ascending as the new epicenter of the Islamic world. It seemed as if the road to the liberation of Palestine and the global ascendancy of Islam inexorably wound through the rugged terrain of Afghanistan. In that moment, Sheikh Azzam's oratory transformed me from a mere tourist of jihad into a bona fide Mujahid.

"How do you feel now about that dream you once had?" My unanticipated question caught Abdul Rahman off guard. He might not have been prepared for such a candid inquiry.

He replied, "I haven't entirely dismissed that dream even now. However, I'll admit that we may have faltered in understanding the nuances of the situation. For jihad, purity of intention and dedication alone aren't sufficient; grasping the complexities is crucial too. As I ponder over it, it appears that formidable forces commandeered the Afghan jihad for their own objectives. The Gulf countries, apprehensive about the Islamic awakening movement, seized the opportunity to relocate the battlefield of jihad to distant lands. Meanwhile, the blood and financial resources of Muslims in the region became collateral for American interests. Our morale soared as long as the jihad enjoyed American patronage. Yet, the moment the American

guardianship vanished, it felt as though we were suddenly vulnerable beneath the vast, open sky."

"When did you first feel the essence of jihad slipping away?" I inquired with a sense of melancholy.

He paused for a moment and replied, "The realization came in 1989, after the retreat of Russian forces from Afghanistan, and the vanishing presence of our American patrons. The once united mujahideen now clashed amongst themselves. In 1992, the communist regime crumbled, yet the mujahideen failed to reach a consensus on an alternative government. Within those three turbulent years, the once vibrant spirit of the Islamic jihad began to fade. Concurrently, the conflict in Bosnia intensified. Izetbegović nurtured a dream of a sovereign Muslim nation in the very heart of Europe. On the other side, our Pakistani hosts commanded the Arab mujahideen to leave their soil. Returning to our homelands was no easy task. Yet, in Bosnia, we glimpsed a shimmering new hope. Numerous comrades of ours devised plans to journey towards this newfound land of potential."

I asked, "What was your experience like in Bosnia?"

He responded, eyes shadowed with memories, "In Bosnia, we didn't suffer from leadership conflicts; people were united in their respect for Izetbegović. But even there, we faced the duplicity of those who claimed to be our allies, our protectors. One has to wonder, why would America want an independent Muslim state in Europe?"

I countered, "But it seems that America and the free world have supported Bosnia from the start."

He sighed, "Yes, the Western media would have you believe that, but the truth is far more complex. Consider this: when war erupted between Serbia and Slovenia in 1991, American intervention put a stop to it within days. And it took them only a few weeks to end the conflict between Serbia and Croatia. Yet, they allowed the Serbs four long years to teach Muslims a lesson, to decimate Bosnian Muslims,

while the so-called civilized world stood by, silently watching the slaughter. The cruel irony is that the Arab mujahideen, once American allies in Afghanistan, were branded as terrorists by the very same 'free' press when they arrived in Bosnia to aid their Muslim brethren. And as the West's gaze shifted, the Gulf countries too turned away from us, leaving us stranded amidst the turmoil."

"But I've witnessed official support for Bosnia and Chechnya within Saudi Arabia. Prince Sultan even established a high-level committee specifically to back Bosnia," I pointed out.

Abdul Rahman responded, "The Saudi aid flowed into the hands of Western aid agencies. What did that have to do with the mujahideen? The only support that made its way to the mujahideen was sent by individual merchants from Gulf countries. There was this man in Milan, Sheikh Anwar Shaaban, who held considerable sway over the Bosnian mujahideen and had deep connections in the Arab world. One might call him the Abdullah Azzam of the Balkans. Alas, merely two years ago, he was martyred at a checkpoint."

The more we spoke, the more I realized that the Bosnian experience was far from uplifting. I continued to probe, seeking to illuminate the recesses of Abdul Rahman's thoughts, eager to understand the complexities of his perspective.

Abdul Rahman shared, "Our presence in Bosnia, the undeniable impact it had. The local mujahideen, their spirits lifted. Bosnian Muslims, they were so disconnected from their faith; concepts like the prohibition of alcohol and pork were vague to them. We tried, we genuinely tried to educate them, to guide them. Our companions orchestrated programs in villages, aligning communities with Islamic principles. And when the Bosnian state tottered on the brink, poised to collapse, we were there, and the tide of battle changed. I can't call it a failure. But the Dayton Agreement? It stole victory at the negotiating table."

I pondered, "Are we missing something? Ten years of jihad in Afghanistan, four to five years of struggle for an independent Muslim state in Bosnia, and just like that, everything crumbles before reaching its logical conclusion. What triggered this?"

He replied thoughtfully, "It's difficult to identify anything specific. We began with little foresight, swayed by mere rhetoric, not examining the intricacies of the matter. The dream of a new dawn, it was intoxicating. Sermons, scholars, their miraculous speeches only fanned the flames. You're right, this issue demands more than a cursory glance. If only a thinker would delve into it, creating a detailed study."

As Abdul Rahman spoke, I found myself submerged in the complexity of the situation, recognizing the need to dig deeper, to examine the circumstances that molded these experiences. It became evident that understanding required more, that there was so much to learn through meticulous exploration.

The words Abdul Rahman had shared with me, they lingered, tucked away in some corner of my mind. Time passed, and I found myself in Riyadh, at a gathering of intellects, listening to the Vice President of Bosnia. Prince Turki Al Faisal chaired the event. As if he could sense the unspoken question on my lips - why did the dream of an independent Muslim state in Bosnia fade away? - he spoke, his voice laced with heartache. At the OIC meeting, the discussion of recognizing an independent Muslim state had been met with resistance. Hundreds of self-interests, they argued, and in doing so, closed the doors to a new Muslim country joining their brotherhood. "Where is the Islamic fraternity?" he asked. "What has become of the Muslim Ummah?" His voice trembled, tears threatened to spill.

And I thought, maybe Abdul Rahman was right. There's something, isn't there, that we, in our self-interest, refuse to discuss openly? But without honest conversation, how can we ever hope to understand where the true problem lies?

35

The Forsaken, Whispering Minority

Not long after my return from Peshawar, I received an invitation to attend a conference in Riyadh. The event, organized by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, aimed to address the problems faced by Muslim minorities. My proposed paper was accepted, but I couldn't help but feel uneasy about being labeled a 'minority.' It was unsettling to see that even our own people began to perceive us in this light, choosing to approach our issues through the lens of minority status.

In the midst of my struggle, I stumbled upon an essay by American urban expert Louis Wirth, who delved into the political and psychological nuances surrounding the term 'minority.' Wirth argued that by labeling a group as a minority, we inadvertently set them apart from the national mainstream, fostering a sense of otherness. This division nurtures the belief that they are indeed different from ordinary people. The consequences are twofold: it demotes them to a secondary status in society while simultaneously depriving them of any meaningful participation in national life.

Wirth's argument resonated with me on a deeply personal level. I had always been resistant to the idea of being considered a minority, and Wirth's insights provided me with the intellectual foundation for my long-held belief. He emphasized that even if a group deemed a minority constituted sixty percent of the population, their sheer numbers couldn't negate the feelings of deprivation, helplessness, and destitution that arose from this categorization. With renewed conviction, I set out to write my article, hoping to present our stance on the international stage, bolstered by Wirth's scholarly evidence and arguments.

I pondered the situation of Indian Muslims, who had held a leading role on the central stage of this nation for centuries. How had they

suddenly come to accept this illusion that they were a minority, impoverished, and their place now permanently shifted to the margins instead of the center stage? I discovered that in 1871, the British introduced a census which implanted the notion that only fifteen percent of the country's population consisted of high-caste Hindus, while Muslims and Dalit nations made up forty-five percent.

Faced with this reality, high-caste Hindus had no choice but to adopt an identity that included the numerical strength of other nations as well. The term "Hindu" was not originally associated with a specific nation or religion. Rather, it was a name given by Arabs to the people living in the Indus Valley. High-caste Hindus embraced this new, ambiguous identity, even incorporating Shudra/Dalit, Adivasi, and at times, Jains and Sikhs.

Under the umbrella of these conflicting and opposing ideologies, high-caste Hindus became so deeply entrenched that Muslims witnessed their identity dissolving into this sea of contradictions. Consequently, concerns for their security arose. They seemed to have forgotten that their numerical strength in this country had not significantly differed for centuries, and that a Pan-Hindu identity, uniting nations with opposing beliefs and ideologies, had never existed in this land.

Louis's writing served as a profound awakening for me. From my childhood, I'd always been aware of the issue, but I lacked the intellectual tools to give voice to it. His work bestowed upon me the language I so desperately needed. Now, the psychological and political factors behind designating Indian Muslims as a 'minority' became clear to me. This classification forced Indian Muslims onto a path of deprivation and helplessness. After all, in any democratic system, the power lies with the majority. When everything hinges on the majority's caprices, the experience of being a minority feels like an unending torment.

After much reflection, I came to understand that Muslims have indeed always been a numerical minority in the Indian subcontinent. Even

during Umar's reign, when the Islamic state's borders expanded immensely and important centers like Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo emerged, the proportion of Muslims in these key cities never surpassed four or five percent. Yet, in spite of their limited numbers, their influence reverberated across the globe. Their caravans journeyed from east to west, north to south, with a sense of grandeur and purpose, as if they had been entrusted with upholding justice and fairness. In those times, their numerical minority did not instill feelings of deprivation or helplessness. They were strangers to the disheartening concept of 'minority.'

In the grand tapestry of human history, it's no secret that a small, elite group has often held dominion over the majority. Even in our current democratic structures, parties with a mere thirty to thirty-five percent of the vote manage to secure majorities in parliaments and assemblies. Look at the United States, where those who ascend to power through the presidential election system are frequently accused of perpetuating 'minority rule.'

The crux of the issue isn't about being numerically inferior; such a state doesn't inherently signify a flaw. The real challenge emerges when certain communities choose to view their small numbers as weakness rather than strength. This mindset shackles them to the belief that they are inferior, helpless, and devoid of power, leaving them with no meaningful role on the central stage of authority. It's vital to recognize the distinction between being in the minority numerically and adopting the mentality of a minority, for they are entirely different matters.

After attending a conference in Riyadh, I found myself immersed in a profound realization: the core issue faced by Muslim minorities around the world is a self-imposed psychological barrier. As I conversed with leaders of Muslim organizations from various European countries, it became evident that they were more concerned with their cultural and ethnic identities than with any prophetic mission.

These individuals seemed to have designed their lives around existing on the fringes of Western societies from the very beginning. I pondered over the transformation that other communities experienced in countries like the United States, where the white population is dominant. Once considered external elements, Italian and Latino communities eventually achieved a status akin to white communities.

Similarly, people who migrated from Northern Ireland due to religious persecution found important positions in American society, even becoming presidents. Jews, who fled Nazi Germany, did not see themselves as a helpless minority; instead, they viewed themselves as an integral part of American society, which led them to excel in various fields.

Although some argue that becoming a white community is a gradual process, the undeniable fact remains that thriving nations keenly analyze society's dynamics and constantly seek opportunities to take the reins. On the other hand, those who see themselves as a minority from the outset, or whose primary goal is to establish themselves as a cultural entity, cannot bear the weight of great leadership responsibilities.

The first generation of Muslims arrived in different countries and regions through military conquests to establish justice and fairness. They encountered diverse languages and cultures and sought to find their place within the dynamic engine of the host society. This process led to the dissolution of their original Arab culture, giving birth to new languages and cultures. In a sense, this can also be considered a process of becoming a white community.

One day, we found ourselves gathered in the warm embrace of the Khozama Center lobby, accompanied by a small entourage of like-minded souls. The conference's opening act had drawn to a close, leaving us scattered in clusters, animatedly exchanging ideas. A British gentleman, with an air of sophistication, questioned the notion of Indian Muslims as a minority, arguing the improbability of such a

large number fitting the definition. He also pointed out the inadequacy of official statistics in representing their true numerical strength.

He painted a picture of the time of independence when the subcontinent's Muslim population stood at a staggering ninety million. As the land divided, forty million Muslims remained in India, with the remaining fifty million finding new homes in eastern and western Pakistan. By comparing the total populations of modern-day Bangladesh and Pakistan, he urged us to reconsider the proportion of Indian Muslims and to reevaluate our understanding of their true numerical strength. With a theatrical flourish, he patted my shoulder, laughing heartily and declaring the revelation of a great secret.

The conversation meandered, and an Indian delegate shared his apprehension that the ever-growing population might someday strip Indian Muslims of their minority status, consequently depriving them of the benefits they currently enjoy. Dr. Sajid, who had remained silent thus far, revealed a keen interest in our dialogue. An advisor to a British aid organization, Sajid appeared to be in his early forties. He spoke with the eloquence of a seasoned lecturer, as though he had arrived armed with expertise on the subject. He posed a rhetorical question: What fear of loss could there be for a nation that has already been stripped of everything? He went on to reveal that Indian Muslims have long been excluded from constitutional protections intended for minorities, a fact that remained unknown to many.

What do you mean? I opted for the art of playing dumb. He said, "Did you ever dive into the pages of the 1948 Draft Constitution? If not, how could you grasp that when the draft laws of 1948 finally emerged as the Indian Constitution in 1952, after navigating a sea of intense debates and amendments, its very essence had been altered? Muslims found themselves outside the realm of constitutional safeguards, and all of this unfolded with such finesse that even the wisest among us were left in the dark, unable to discern the shift and its underlying ramifications."

I had listened to many accounts regarding the Constituent Assembly and had even perused some of its debates, yet I remained uninformed about the fundamental distinction between the 1948 draft and the ratified 1952 Constitution. Curious, I inquired if he would be inclined to illuminate this subject further.

He responded enthusiastically, "Certainly! My research paper focuses on this very topic. I have delved into a comparative analysis of these two documents and arrived at the conclusion that the protections initially guaranteed to the Muslim minority in the 1948 draft were utterly negated in the later amendments. Intriguingly, all of this transpired beneath the captivating banners of democracy, secularism, and the democratic process."

I inquired with a sense of curiosity, "Would you kindly provide more specifics on the matter?"

He responded with passion, "The draft of 1948 held a promise of reserved seats for minorities within the legislature. Government job quotas were set aside for these very groups. It was proposed that measures be implemented to guarantee their representation in the cabinet, while also establishing an administrative framework that would continuously monitor and ensure minority representation. The Constituent Assembly, which materialized in 1946 under the Cabinet Mission Plan, had its foundations rooted in the protection of minorities. But as time progressed, the course of the discussions took a dramatic turn. Initially, the Scheduled Castes were classified as minorities, only to be subsequently removed from this category and integrated into the Hindu community. K.M. Munshi, the figurehead of this debate, argued that categorizing Scheduled Castes as minorities was a misguided notion. He believed they were an intrinsic part of the Hindu community, deserving of concessions until they could be fully assimilated. The Assembly eventually embraced Munshi's proposed amendment.

I couldn't help but express my amazement, "So, in the beginning, even the Scheduled Castes were perceived as a minority?"

He confirmed, "Absolutely! Not only were they included in the minority category, but Ambedkar even advocated for their separate representation in the assembly and parliament, through distinct elections, much like the Muslims."

I pressed further, "What transpired after that?"

His voice grew somber, "Gandhi put an end to it. In 1932, Gandhi embarked on a fast in Poona, firmly declaring that he would never concede to separate electorates for the 'untouchables,' regardless of the cost. He refused to acknowledge them as a minority. Instead, Gandhi aimed to incorporate the political influence of the 'untouchables' within the Hindu community, and ultimately, he succeeded in doing so."

"But, the 'untouchables' were seen as impure by the upper-caste Hindus, not even allowed to enter temples. Gandhi, in his daring way, challenged this norm," I mused.

He elucidated, "Gandhi had his gaze fixed on the future. He was aware that, in the times to come, the power of numbers would hold immense significance. If the 'untouchables' were to emerge as a distinct entity, they'd likely find greater opportunities for religious and social justice within the Muslim community compared to Hindus. So, with this threat looming, Gandhi orchestrated movements to defy the caste system and tirelessly endeavored to incorporate the 'untouchables' into the Hindu fold. And, ultimately, he triumphed."

"But Gandhi's departure was in 1948, and the draft laws continued to be amended well beyond that," I observed.

He responded, "Gandhi had established the groundwork. In his wake, the leaders that followed first ousted the 'untouchables' from the minority group, and then proceeded to dissolve the protections granted to minorities. They argued that such provisions only bred distrust and widened the gap between the majority and minority communities."

"So, were there better opportunities for Muslims in the 1948 draft constitution?" Indeed, my friend, there were! The draft contained aspects of a highly strategic nature, like a complex dance of political maneuvering. For instance, the separate elections for Muslims, which vanished like a mirage in the desert for various reasons. Instead, the Scheduled Castes were offered special constitutional protections for ten years, a sweet nectar of safety, but alas, Muslims found themselves in the cold, excluded from these warm embraces of safeguards.

I couldn't help but let the words escape my lips, "So, did Ambedkar only care about his own community?"

He responded, a somber tone in his voice, "No, that would be painting him with too broad a brush. Ambedkar was like a lone warrior, deeply troubled by this situation; he was confronting the mighty high caste Hindus, facing the storm that was Mahatma Gandhi, a man who sought to ensure Hindu dominance at any cost."

"But Gandhi, he was a beacon of hope for the untouchables, calling them Harijans, children of God, opening temple doors for them..."

"Enough!" he cried, his voice heavy with emotion. "This propaganda, like a relentless flood, has poisoned our hearts and minds. To understand Gandhi, my dear friend, dive into the ocean of Ambedkar's words; only then will you uncover the hidden treasure that is the entire scheme. The British, those cunning masters, they included untouchables in the Hindu religion category in the census. In 1932, their population was a staggering 44 million, half of the Muslim population in the subcontinent. High caste Hindus claimed the untouchables, like possessive lovers, while many of them sought solace in the arms of Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism. In Punjab alone, between 1881 and 1941, their proportion, like a fading star, declined from 44% to 29%. Hindus, in their desperation, feared that if this trend continued, the dominance of the upper castes would crumble like a sandcastle before the rising tide. As Swami Vivekananda poetically said, 'A person leaving the circle of Hindus not only deprives us of one individual but also adds one individual to our enemies.'"

"Vivekananda, too, shared such thoughts! His enlightened perspective is often celebrated in reference to his participation in the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago," I mentioned.

He replied, "If my memory serves me right, I'd recommend taking a look at his interview in the April 1899 issue of Prabuddha Bharata. It'll provide a glimpse of the extent to which Hindu leaders were troubled by these circumstances. The reform movements within Hinduism were essentially aimed at solidifying their own camp and preventing Shudras from converting to other faiths. Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj, even initiated the Shuddhi movement to purify Shudras. In Punjab, the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, also part of the Arya Samaj mission, invited Ambedkar to address their annual conference. However, when they realized that Ambedkar did not intend to accept Hindu dominance and sought to remove Shudras from the Hindu fold, they rescinded their invitation."

"I can imagine how frustrating that must have been for Ambedkar," I said.

He had grown accustomed to such challenges. In his proposed speech, Ambedkar conveyed that the concept of Hindu society was nothing more than an illusion. The term 'Hindu' was of foreign origin, absent from any ancient Sanskrit sources. Its usage couldn't be traced back to a time before the arrival of Muslims. So, how did Hindu society come into existence? Various castes were certainly present. Ambedkar characterized Hinduism as a "veritable chamber of horrors" for the untouchables. This is precisely why he ultimately chose to convert to another religion, seeking an escape from this torturous chamber.

"Gandhi was certainly against caste discrimination," I began, but he interrupted me. "Hold on, you've started speaking the language of propaganda again," he said. "It seems you've read authors like Louis Fischer."

"Yes, you're correct," I admitted, somewhat sheepishly.

Writers like Fischer have created such a celestial halo around Gandhi that all earthly reality has been overshadowed. To them, Gandhi is a divinely inspired figure, not an ordinary man. There's biographical writing, and then there's hagiography, which is primarily about writing saints' lives. Gandhi was fortunate to have skilled hagiographers from the start. You'd be surprised to know that before returning to India, Gandhi already had two biographies written about him. Both were published in South Africa in 1909 and 1910. French biographer Romain Rolland published his biography, "Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being," in 1924, even before he had met Gandhi. Don't you think there's "a hidden beloved behind this rusty veil" who has elevated Gandhi from a shrewd politician to the position of a Mahatma?

A shrewd politician? "I think you're exaggerating now," I objected.

"No, my friend, this is the truth. Because you're used to seeing him in a halo of sanctity, my words seem strange to you. Now you tell me, how would you judge a person who promotes the spinning of cotton and leads the Khadi Movement, but the expenses of his ashram are borne by mill owners like G.D. Birla? The one who, in South Africa, protected Indian capitalists' interests by making deals with the British rulers, considered the local Black residents as inferior, and assisted the British in oppressing them. Who, in 1920, by getting involved in the Khilafat Movement, turned it into the Non-Cooperation Movement, and then, when the movement started gaining momentum, abruptly and unilaterally, without consulting the Muslims, announced the end of the Satyagraha in 1922, leaving the Khilafat Movement suddenly feeling like it was left in a desert—what would your opinion be about such a person?"

Dr. Sajid's revelations were still unraveling when a commotion at the door caught our attention. The bus to the Sheraton Hotel was now ready to depart, signaling a shift in our conversation. As we continued chatting on the bus, the aura of sanctity surrounding Mahatma Gandhi seemed to dissolve under the weight of Dr. Sajid's words. I found myself mulling over the possibility of future discussions with this

insightful man, and I decided to inquire about his unique insights into the Constituent Assembly's dealings.

Eager for more, I said, "Let's put aside Ambedkar and Gandhi for a moment, and delve into why the Muslim members of the assembly didn't object to the fundamental changes being made in the draft laws."

He responded, almost wearily, "Who would have objected? Initially, there were twenty-eight Muslim members in the Constituent Assembly. Ten of them migrated to Pakistan, leaving the remaining few in disarray, unable to grasp how to navigate the shifting landscape. The non-Muslim members had grown cold, their tone and demeanor unrecognizable. There was one woman, Begum Aijaz Rasool, a member of the Constituent Assembly, who dared to formally oppose separate elections and reservation of seats for Muslims in the assemblies. She believed that such reservations would only deepen the chasm between the minority and majority, sabotaging any chance of winning over the hearts of the majority. One can only imagine how delighted Vallabhbhai Patel, the committee's chair, would have been to hear Begum Sahiba's passionate arguments."

Bizarre! I found myself exclaiming, somewhat involuntarily. He continued, his voice tinged with a tinge of melancholy, "Yes, the nationalist Muslims were caught in this peculiar bind. They had to nod along with their Hindu compatriots, just to demonstrate their unwavering loyalty to the nation. But not all were like that. There were some, like Maulana Hasrat Mohani from Uttar Pradesh, Hussein Imam from Bihar, and Mehboob Ali Baig from Madras, who valiantly fought for proportional representation until the bitter end. Their voices, however, were drowned out by those who claimed that proportional representation was merely a thinly-veiled version of separate electorates. Pandit Nehru, in his eloquent wisdom, attempted to smother this demand by asserting that it wouldn't bode well for a small minority to be perceived as distrustful of the majority, as if they sought to keep themselves apart. Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant chimed in, arguing that even if Muslims did manage to secure seats in Parliament through separate electorates, their sparse numbers would

render them incapable of occupying any decisive positions; after all, the majority's votes would always tip the scales. So, you see, whether Muslims found their way into Parliament through proportional representation or separate electorates, the puppet masters orchestrating this democratic farce knew full well that, in time, democracy would inevitably devolve into the tyranny of the majority. One man, Z. H. Lari, had the foresight to recognize this looming danger from the outset. He maintained that in a democracy, every individual should be afforded the opportunity for representation, and that the key was for each viewpoint to receive representation in accordance with its numerical proportion. Yet here, under the pretense of democracy, the stage was being set for the rule of a staggering fifty-one percent of the population. Lari argued that this could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered democracy."

The conversation exuded an air of reasonableness, so it was perplexing why Congress leaders hadn't given it the attention it merited. As he spoke, he explained that despite the discussion's inherent sensibility, in the aftermath of independence, it seemed as if Muslims were becoming increasingly marginalized within the country.

Patel, with his eloquence, had made it clear that with the creation of Pakistan, there would be no room for a two-nation theory in the remaining regions of India. It was as if an unyielding barrier was being erected against Muslim representation in government positions. And yet, as Muslims were pushed away from constitutional safeguards, the promotion of secularism and democracy persisted.

Voices advocating for Muslim rights were swiftly subdued, with those in power asserting that such discussions would undermine the nation's secular fabric, fostering sectarianism and separatism. This would offer an ideal opportunity for revivalist Hindus, who sought to turn the nation into a Hindu state, to organize and consolidate power.

Confronted with this reality, Muslims had no choice but to demonstrate their unwavering loyalty to their country and homeland.

They bore the weight of the constitution's empty promises, clinging to them as their last bastion of psychological support.

Ambedkar, the architect of the amended constitution, was acutely conscious of its flaws. He once observed in the Rajya Sabha, "The Constitution of India was a magnificent temple built for God, but before God could be seated there, the demons took over."

As I absorbed Dr. Sajid's words, I found myself captivated and intrigued. But now, the hotel lobby called, and it was time for me to depart. With a courteous request for permission to leave, I made my way towards the refuge of my room, contemplating the intricacies of the world we inhabit.

At the Youth Conference, a magnetic force seemed to be at work, attracting a remarkable assembly of spirited young individuals and esteemed Muslim personalities from all corners of the world. It was an era when Islamists were emerging as a dominant force everywhere. From East to West, backed by Gulf investment and American patronage—or at the very least, the absence of resistance from the Western non-believer systems—Islamic movements were passionately engaged in an array of educational, cultural, missionary, and jihadist pursuits.

Riyadh's complex took on the atmosphere of an international carnival for Muslims, where I reveled in the opportunity to connect with like-minded intellectuals from diverse backgrounds. As the conference wound down, our shared journey was far from over. We continued to visit important institutions in various cities, traveling on exclusive planes and engaging with local communities. The friendships formed during this adventure were so deeply intertwined with camaraderie that they appeared unbreakable. Though the conference itself spanned a mere three or four days, the invigorating discussions among Muslims seemed to know no bounds. Every moment felt charged with electricity, as if we were living through a powerful reawakening. With bated breath, we stood on the precipice, sensing that the reins of history were tantalizingly close to being handed back to us.

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Benevolence: A Fleeting Mirage

During those days of fervent revival, I found myself lost in the enchanting gatherings of Najd and Hejaz, unsure of how long I'd be captivated by their allure. Suddenly, though, a weariness crept into my heart, as if the very essence of these meetings was fading away. On a fateful morning, I sat at the breakfast table in Hotel Ajyad, nestled near the Holy Mosque in Mecca. A bountiful array of delicacies lay before me, yet my heart was not stirred to indulge.

Initially, I attributed this disinterest to my ascetic nature, which sought comfort in the hard embrace of the floor over plush hotel beds and found solace in the simplicity of fruits and lentils rather than opulent dishes. However, as clear symptoms emerged in the following days, I realized this was not a spiritual epiphany but the grip of severe jaundice.

I had planned to explore North African countries during this journey, with friends encouraging me to delve into British libraries for research on my PhD thesis. Syed Hassan Mutahar, then-editor of the Muslim World League Journal, had even arranged for all the necessary preparations. Alas, I found myself with no other choice but to return home with haste.

As my health spiraled downwards, I felt as though I was a battered ship, lost amidst the relentless storms, or perhaps on the verge of my final voyage in life. Stepping out of Delhi airport, a chilling cold struck me like a dagger. With my brother's help, I managed to reach home through a whirlwind of trials and tribulations.

Upon seeing my frail and weakened state, my father's worry was palpable. Around three in the morning, as I lay burning with fever, I felt the soothing touch of my father's fingers on my forehead. His hands, carrying a mysterious power, gently massaged my scorching

skin while he recited the prayer, "Ya Nar Kuni Bardan Wa Salaman Ala Ibrahim." Miraculously, the intensity of my fever waned, and I found solace and relief.

It was then that my father's blessed voice proclaimed "Ya Mosebbibul Asbab" before immersing himself, as was his custom, in his Tahajjud prayer.

Days later, as my health began to recuperate, I caught wind of a new storm brewing within the nation. The Babri Masjid, long locked away and haunted by the surreptitious placement of a Ram Lalla idol in 1949, was suddenly unveiled to Hindu pilgrims on February 1, 1986. This unmasking, a secretive collaboration between the government and radical Hindu factions, left the Muslim community grappling to comprehend its consequences.

For months, Muslim political and religious leaders had been delicately engaged in conversations with the government, seeking solace from potential repercussions of the Shah Bano case. They presented a draft bill, harboring a fragile hope that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, known for his personal empathy and vested interest in the matter, would find a suitable resolution for their community.

Tahir Mahmood, a professor of law at Delhi University and a confidant who had enlightened Rajiv Gandhi on the nuances of Islamic law pertaining to alimony, held such fervent expectations that, according to newspaper reports, he proclaimed far and wide that only one person in the government truly understood the plight of Muslims: the esteemed Rajiv Gandhi himself. The Prime Minister, a master of innuendo, insinuated that he would soon unveil a bill in Parliament to counteract the religious interference birthed by the Shah Bano case.

In the midst of chaos, the Muslim Majlis Mashawarat had been relentlessly advocating for the restoration of Delhi's mosques since 1983. These mosques had been held in the government's iron grip since India's hard-fought independence. Leaders like Syed

Shahabuddin and others had submitted heartfelt memoranda to Mrs. Gandhi, holding on to the hope of change.

During Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, the Shah Bano movement ignited a fire of nationwide Muslim solidarity. The intimate dialogue between the government and the Muslim religious and national leadership fostered the impression that the government was courting Muslims, seeking their votes with fervent flattery.

Ali Mian Nadwi, in "Caravan-e-Zindagi," recounted that during this pivotal period, he had shared "unrestrained" meetings with the Prime Minister. It appeared as though the political and spiritual leadership of Muslims had managed to captivate Rajiv Gandhi, transforming him into a marionette that danced to their tune, echoing only what they desired to hear. However, fate took an unexpected turn when, as discussions on the Shah Bano bill were still underway, the Babri Masjid was abruptly unlocked to placate extremist Hindus.

Caught unawares, the Muslim leadership found themselves ensnared in a labyrinth of bewilderment. The Prime Minister, whom they had praised for his sagacity and integrity, now walked a precarious tightrope, granting Muslims protection under Sharia law while allowing Hindus access to the forcibly installed idol of Ram Lalla in the Babri Masjid.

Left with no other choice, the Muslims focused their energies on the bill still awaiting passage in Parliament. They retreated into solitude, pouring their hearts and minds into refining the proposed bill, clinging to the hope of finding a resolution amidst the darkness.

In those days, an article was published in Pakistan Times related to alimony for divorced women, in which the position of the Indian Supreme Court in the Shah Bano case was confirmed. The author argued that for a helpless woman who has no means of support after divorce, it is fair and in accordance with the true spirit of the Quran for her to receive a reasonable amount from her former husband. In the interpretation of وللمطلقات متاع بالمعروف حقاً على المتقين, the

progressive Muslim circles believed that متاع بالمعروفis a significant amount that can save a divorced woman from becoming dependent on others. Thus, it is essential for pious Muslims to demonstrate good behavior and generosity towards their ex-wives, even after separation. Traditional circles argued that this verse is primarily about encouraging and persuading the Muslim husbands to be generous with their ex-wives, and not a commandment or law. On the other hand, progressive circles argued that caring for the needs of the poor and helpless is already a commendable act in Islam, especially when it involves a woman who has been affected by her own divorce decision and whose life has become one of helplessness. Then, why would a God-fearing husband ignore the instruction of متاع بالمعروف?

Under the sheltering wings of Article 125 of the Indian Constitution, a delicate ray of hope gleamed for Shah Bano, who sought sustenance from the man who once cradled her heart but had since vanished into the shadows of former spouses. Initially materialized as Article 488, it extended a lifeline to those wandering souls bereft of a guardian to anchor them.

When 1973 arrived, the heartaches of divorced women found recognition, and they too were enfolded in the nurturing embrace of this provision. Yet, a gentle breeze carried the proviso that the maintenance bestowed must reflect the ex-husband's financial stature, never daring to breach the sum of 500 rupees.

In the enigmatic case of Shah Bano, the court, having delved into the shadowy recesses of her ex-husband's fiscal realm, ordained a monthly sum of 179 rupees to be her due. The traditional scholars of the board knit their brows, questioning why a man, now severed from his divorced wife, should shoulder the burden of sustaining an unrelated woman.

The board, in its sagacity, suggested an alternate course, transferring the responsibility of support onto the shoulders of the divorced woman's cherished kin. And should they too be incapable of bearing the weight, the Waqf Board would step forward, embracing the mantle

of her care and guardianship. Muslim scholars were certainly not unaware that the Waqf Board, burdened by its mismanagement and misconduct, struggled to provide reasonable salaries for its employees and mosque imams. In such situations, leaving vulnerable divorced women to depend solely on the mercy of the Waqf Board would be both heartless and irresponsible. However, the scholars' interpretation of Shariah allowed for little flexibility in adapting its commandments to reflect the expectations the Quran had for a Muslim husband. So, faced with such limitations, what alternatives did these poor scholars genuinely have at their disposal?

Rajiv Gandhi found himself profoundly impacted after perusing an article published in the Pakistan Times. It is speculated that Arun Shourie had sent him the piece along with a note, implying that Indian scholars' vehement opposition to the Supreme Court's decision on divorced women's alimony—claiming it to be against Shariah—wasn't entirely accurate. For, across the border, Muslim scholars harbored differing opinions on the matter.

Seeking counsel from Najma Heptulla, Rajiv discovered that only a select group of scholars adhered to this viewpoint when interpreting the provision of reasonable maintenance, while the majority aligned with traditional scholars. Najma allegedly enlightened the Prime Minister on the potential consequences of disregarding traditional scholars' demands; with their influence over the Muslim majority, the Congress might lose its Muslim vote bank.

The epiphany struck Rajiv Gandhi, and he resolved to present a new bill in Parliament, aimed at safeguarding the rights of Muslim women. Eventually, the bill's draft was prepared. The scholars on the board and their legal experts meticulously scrutinized each section. Yet, oddly enough, nobody seemed to notice that the new bill still accommodated the previous Supreme Court decision. The new bill's Section 3 unambiguously stated:

"Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force, a reasonable and fair provision and maintenance must

be made and paid within the iddat period by the woman's former husband."

It is astonishing that neither our esteemed scholars nor the board's legal experts could grasp the fact that the phrase "within the iddat period" is used here, not "for the iddat period." It seems that the emphasis here is on ensuring the payment of mata'u al-ma'ruf during the iddat period itself. Years later, in 2001, the Bombay High Court clarified this point in the case of Karim versus Karim, stating that "within" here refers to providing the woman with a suitable and reasonable amount during the iddat period itself.

In September 2001, when the case reached the Supreme Court, the court further affirmed that Section 3(1)(a) of the law does not merely cover the iddat period but also extends to the "divorced woman's remaining life until she marries someone else." However, the maintenance amount must be paid during the iddat period itself and should be reasonable and appropriate, ensuring it is not exclusive to the iddat period since the word "within" is used instead of "for." These were the clear legal nuances that the board's traditional scholars and legal experts, including Abdul Rahim Qureshi, Salman Khurshid, and Tahir Mahmood, failed to grasp in time.

When the draft bill reached its final stage, it also provided the option for a Muslim woman to have her case resolved under Section 125 of the secular law instead of the new law if she preferred. In a way, this last-minute addition undermined the entire campaign for Sharia protection. After all, Shah Bano had also claimed her right to maintenance by taking advantage of this provision. If the secular alternative was to remain available for Muslim women, then why was such a contentious campaign initiated in the name of protecting Sharia?

It's a perplexing tale, really. Muslims sought protection for their Sharia laws, but the new bill barely changed anything. Rajiv Gandhi, a man of wit and ingenuity, managed to include something in the bill that made traditional scholars believe he was a guardian of Sharia.

Even with the new bill's passage, the situation didn't change much. Life has a funny way of working, doesn't it?

But in a move that could be described as sly and calculated, Rajiv Gandhi sidestepped the allegations of testing Muslims' presumed loyalty. Instead, he appeased the extremist Hindus with a "gift" they couldn't resist—the Babri Masjid. By unlocking the mosque's doors through unlawful means, he etched his name in history as the 'first kar-sevak', or the prime instigator of the Ayodhya conflict.

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The Silent Echoes of Shiva's Power

It had been about a month since I returned to the familiar landscape of my homeland. As time passed, the illness slowly retreated, leaving behind a lingering weakness. My days were mostly spent in the confines of my bed, flipping through newspapers and magazines, or occasionally mustering the energy to join the bookshop gatherings. Word of my illness had traveled from the far-off lands of Najd and Hijaz to the circles of friends in India.

One day, I received a heartfelt letter from Maulana Muqtada Hasan Azhari of Banaras. He shared his concern, writing, "Learning about your bout with jaundice has brought me great distress. I pray to the Almighty for your swift and complete recovery." As if extending a guiding hand from afar, he also offered some sage advice: "Your plan to venture to London is promising. When the time is right, journey forth and forge a path of service to your faith from there."

My camaraderie with Moqtada Sahib was forged during the Riyadh conference itself. We often found ourselves amidst relaxed evening gatherings, where like-minded individuals passionate about the Islamic renaissance shaped ambitious plans. Discussions revolved around the achievements and new breakthroughs of the Islamic movement across various regions. His letter unfurled a tapestry of faith-stirring memories, prompting me to recall Dr. Abdul Qadir Usman Ali. He aspired to establish an institution in Tanzania, dedicated exclusively to charting the Muslim community's future. Something about our exchange must have hinted at a shared curiosity for the days ahead, as he graciously invited me to visit his newly-established center.

One day, during a conference, a unique opportunity emerged to meet Sheikh bin Baz at an evening gathering. I couldn't help but notice two young Saudi princes diligently serving fruit to the Sheikh. Despite his lack of physical sight, the Sheikh was gifted with an extraordinary level

of insight and intuition. Within a few short minutes of our meeting, he skillfully probed my background, showed keen interest in my PhD topic, and even became so captivated by it that he spontaneously delivered an insightful impromptu lecture. This initial encounter with the Sheikh paved the way for my regular attendance at his future meetings and assemblies.

In due course, at the Sheikh's persuasion, an arrangement was made for me to join him for lunch at his residence. Among the esteemed guests at the table were his dedicated translator, Maulvi Luqman Salafi, and Professor AbdulJalil. The latter held a distinguished position as a senior professor of English at Imam University and was widely revered for his commitment to Islamic outreach and propagation. His experiences in interacting with non-Muslims were particularly noteworthy.

Professor AbdulJalil was adamant that I should become part of this vibrant movement of Islamic awakening, which was currently making waves in the lands of Najd and Hejaz. He predicted that this movement, with its radiant spirit, was on the brink of shedding light upon the world.

The Sheikh had only just commenced his meal when three or four Bedouins joined us at our traditional dining setting. They served themselves from the same communal platter while simultaneously expressing their grievances to the Sheikh. By the conclusion of the meal, they had aired a multitude of issues. Their tone, raw and abrupt, was emblematic of the Bedouin demeanor. In response, the Sheikh urged them to visit his office on the following Sunday, promising to find solutions for their problems. However, these Bedouins were unable to contain their impatience for three days. They labeled the Sheikh a liar, accusing him of attempting to deflect the issue, firmly stating that if he genuinely cared, he would endeavour to resolve the matter instantaneously. Despite the Sheikh's attempts to delineate the distinction between his office and home life, the Bedouins steadfastly held onto their accusations of dishonesty and deceit. As they took their leave, they left behind the words, "May God guide you, Bin Baz." I

noted that the Sheikh's countenance remained devoid of any signs of vexation or annoyance.

Each time I was in bin Baz's gatherings, the simplicity, transparency, and profound depth of his character, indeed its majesty, deeply imprinted itself on my heart and mind. However, one conundrum I failed to grasp was how Sheikh bin Baz, a man renowned for his profound empathy, was able to sign the execution orders of Juhayman and his revolutionary allies. These were the young men who had ignited a new revolt within the sacred confines of Mecca on the dawn of the fifteenth century. It was a perplexing revelation that differences in interpretation could incite such vehement conflicts amongst the devout followers of the same faith.

Rashid Rajae was his name, Vice-Chancellor of Umm Al-Qura University. He had this thick, solemn voice that somehow filled the room as he presided over the conference session. I was there, presenting my paper, my ideas, my soul's labor on the cultural crises of Indian Muslims. His eyes, clear and sharp, bore into me as I spoke, and when I finished, he invited me to Mecca, and promptly offered me a position as a young faculty member, right there and then.

The awakening was calling me, softly, insistently, like a song that you can't get out of your head. It was seductive, pulling at my heart and mind, both terrifying and exhilarating, like riding a roller coaster in the dark. You know there's a track, but you can't see it, and you're not sure whether you're going up or down, or if you'll crash.

But then there was India. My India, our India. The place where I was born, where I grew up, where I learned to dream. The place that was a part of me, just as I was a part of it. And the Muslims there, my brothers and sisters, were suffering, struggling, fighting battles that seemed to have no end.

What if there was a way to help them, to guide them, to show them a new path? What if I could do that? What if I could make a difference?

The thought consumed me, filled me with a kind of urgency and desperation that I had never felt before.

And then there was the secular democracy, a cruel joke, a tragic paradox. It promised freedom, equality, justice, but delivered oppression, discrimination, and despair. It was like a beautiful prison, a gilded cage, a torture chamber disguised as a playground. It was worse than Auschwitz, because it pretended to be something it wasn't. It was a monster wearing a mask, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The city was now abuzz with the knowledge of my stay and my ailment. Friends and well-wishers, like clockwork, would frequently pay visits, inquiring about my health. One such day, a group of my old schoolmates turned up. The sight of some of them, after so many years, filled my heart with joy. Zafar, now successfully cleared his banking management examination. Sajjad was navigating his third year of medical school, and his conversation was filled with the unmistakable hints of the notorious 'third-year syndrome.' However, it was Asif, armed with a stack of Sunday magazines and English newspapers, that truly caught me off guard. "By the Almighty, you're still under the spell of the Dajjal's scrolls!" I exclaimed. My encounter with Asif last year was much the same. Each time I chanced upon him, he would be deeply engrossed in a whirlwind of newspapers and periodicals. His mornings were ushered in by the ritualistic reading of these publications. He absorbed the news with a fervor as if he were reciting divine scripture. We often referred to newspapers as the 'scrolls of the Dajjal,' as they had supplanted Quranic recitation in many Muslim households. Asif always had a wealth of news at his fingertips. His discerning eye never missed details or intricacies. When he spun these news pieces into narratives in his distinct style, it felt as if he had borne witness to these events himself. We affectionately dubbed him 'Asif BBC' for his captivating storytelling prowess. Today, he broached the subject of the Babri Masjid issue as soon as he arrived. He queried, "Do you know what's looming over the country?" And then, answering his own question, he declared, "The specter of communalism will not be easily subdued now."

"What should we do then?" I asked, curiosity swirling around me. He replied with a gentle tone, "Action comes later, my friend. First, we must understand and strategize. These revivalist organizations have been carefully planning, each step thoughtfully orchestrated. The grandiose statements of Muslim leaders and the empty threats of action committees cannot stop them."

"So, what should we do? Do tell," I implored, the question lingering in the air. He mused, "We need deep reflection, introspection even. I'd say we require serious, prophetic contemplation, much like the seclusion experienced in the Cave of Hira, allowing God to plant the seeds of strategy within our hearts to navigate this complex issue." Asif's voice carried a weighty sense of urgency as he continued, "If we don't tackle this matter with extraordinary foresight, the flames of this conflict will inevitably ravage the homes of Indian Muslims, leaving nothing but ashes in their wake."

Oh, come on now, let's not get lost in philosophical musings. Offer a tangible solution, will you?" Zafar implored.

"Well, a practical approach will emerge from our collective ponderings and soul-searching," he responded. "The crucial thing is to ensure our steps align with the right direction. And, you know, it's quite essential to have a genuine examination of the astonishing metamorphosis that's transpired within our nation's tapestry in recent years. It feels like only yesterday, barely two and a half years ago, when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad ignited the Ekta Mata Yajna, a crusade for Hindu unity on a nationwide scale. And now, in a mere two and a half to three years, the nation's panorama has shifted so drastically that it's impossible to look around without witnessing the fiery outbursts of animosity directed against Muslims."

In my view, we must delve even deeper into history, perhaps reaching back to 1983," Zafar interjected, his voice laden with contemplation. "The seeds of unrest amongst Hindus were sown when an influx of conversions to Islam occurred in Meenakshipuram in 1981. It was as if an alarm had been set off for the revivalist organizations."

"Meenakshipuram is undeniably a factor," Sajjad, who had been silent up until that moment, added as he adjusted his perspective. "However, I believe we need to peer even further into the past. The initial misstep, in my estimation, can be traced back to Jayaprakash Narayan. It was during the Janata government era that revivalist Hindus first perceived the once impenetrable fortress of the Congress party as vulnerable. The realization dawned that they could effortlessly vanquish the duplicitous Congress by wielding anti-Islam propaganda and fomenting enmity towards Muslims, ultimately wresting control of the country's reins. From that moment on, the RSS and its affiliated organizations have been ruminating over tactics to transmute their animosity towards Muslims into a political manifesto."

Your point is certainly valid. The events in Meenakshipuram provided them with an opportunity to promote the narrative of Hindu victimization across the nation. In 1983, a nationwide movement was launched, assembling caravans of various sizes that traversed the country for months to unite Hindus from different backgrounds.

"There must have been extensive planning behind this, right?"

Asif, responding to my question, changed his tone and said, "My friend, in the history of independent India, or rather, in the history of upper-caste Hindus, you will not find any other movement of such scale and scope that was carried out on a nationwide level in such an organized manner. It involved Hindus of all sects, even those who had never been part of the Hindu fold before, such as Dalits, Adivasis, Jains, and Sikhs. Just consider this: a single caravan that started from Kathmandu and headed towards Rameshwaram passed through 300,000 villages, covering a distance of 50,000 miles. Another large caravan traveled from the Ganges delta in Bengal to Somnath, while a third one covered the distance from Haridwar to Kanyakumari. I personally witnessed how, when trucks carrying water from Gangotri passed through cities and villages, Dalit women stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Thakur women, seeking blessings. The Shankaracharyas of Puri and Dwarka, who had always endorsed the caste system,

silently granted permission for lower-caste Hindus to join this diverse assembly."

Zafar asked, "What about the other prominent Hindu leaders? What is their stance?"

There are four major Hindu leaders, with two each from Puri and Dwarka. In addition, the Shankaracharyas of Jyotirpeeth and Sringeri also hold significant influence. No statements have been issued by the latter two; however, the Shankaracharya of Puri, Niranjan Devatirtha, who considers himself the 146th Jagadguru, has been continuously fueling this campaign of hatred. He claims that the current government is anti-Hindu and wants to introduce a new bill in Parliament to appease Muslim women. On the other hand, the Shankaracharya of Dwarka regards this entire campaign as political gimmickry and does not give it much importance.

Zafar, with a thoughtful tone, shared his opinion that Muslims should have anticipated and prepared for this delicate situation. He questioned, "It's puzzling how Muslim scholars and intellectuals didn't immediately take notice of such a meticulously organized and strategically planned campaign."

For the first time in history, Hindu sadhus and saints from 85 different sects assembled in a single Yagna Mandap (ritual site). On this extraordinary occasion, a new deity named Bharat Mata was introduced to the pantheon of 330 million Hindu gods and goddesses. Asif continued the story, his voice carrying the weight of the revelation.

"Interesting," Sajjad mused, a hint of surprise in his voice. "I had no idea that the goddess Bharat Mata, often depicted riding a lion in images, is actually a relatively recent creation."

"But why, with 330 million existing gods and goddesses, was there a need for an additional deity?" Zafar questioned, his curiosity piqued.

Asif grinned, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "The old pantheon of gods and goddesses couldn't quite forge the sort of united religious front required to bring the diverse Hindu sects together," he explained. "Bharat Mata, or Mother India, was introduced to fill that void. They know all too well that ancient undivided India, which once encompassed not only Pakistan and Bangladesh but also Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Afghanistan, is now unattainable. But for the formation of a new, almost artificial Hindu national identity, it was crucial to imagine the land of India as a divine goddess, worthy of worship. And so, they presented the Hindu nation as the guardian of this sacred land, its rivers, and its ancient religious and historical sites."

Asif leaned in closer, his voice low and conspiratorial. "That's why you see that when the Ekatmata Yagna procession began, their caravans bore vials of sacred water from various rivers, distributing blessings as they went. They endeavored to convey the message that the dignity of Hindus was inextricably linked to the restoration of their ancient places of worship. They stressed that in a nation where the majority venerates Ram, the Babri Mosque's lock still holds the idol of Ram Lalla captive. Ram yearns for his devotees to liberate him from this bondage. The mosque's lock must be opened, and all should be granted the privilege of beholding Ram in his divine presence."

"But wasn't the 'unlock' demand absent from the 1983 movement?" Zafar interjected, striving to untangle the timeline of events.

"Indeed, you're spot on," he responded, his voice etched with a trace of admiration. "1983 was merely the stage being set, the ground being leveled. The 'unlock' crusade didn't ignite until the following year. That's when the VHP, acting as both the puppeteer and the playwright, orchestrated the Ram Janmabhoomi Yajna Committee, unveiled Ram's idol ensnared behind bars, and subsequently paraded these idols across diverse cities. Their underlying intention was to instill a palpable sense of victimhood in ordinary Hindus. The narrative was of Ram, despite being in his homeland, still held captive within structures erected by Muslim emperors.

"That occurred in September of 1984. At that time, I was in Sitamarhi, visiting my maternal grandparents. The turbulence originated there. Sitamarhi has its own share of tumultuous events. There exist two temples, both associated with Sita's birthplace, each asserting that Sita was born at their respective locations."

"So, she was supposedly born at both places simultaneously?" Sajjad queried, his voice betraying his incredulity.

"Indeed," he affirmed. "One temple resides in the Old Dham, and the other is nestled three kilometers away in Janaki Asthan. Each possesses its own pond: one known as Urjiwa Kund, the other as Sita Kund. Both stake the claim that when King Janak ventured out with his plow, praying for the cessation of the drought, his plow inadvertently struck a copper vessel from which Sita emerged. A handful of pacifiers, who are adept at finding a middle ground in any dispute, propose that while Sita's appearance took place at the Old Dham, her 'Chhatti' ceremony unfolded in Janaki Asthan."

"The circumstances in Sitamarhi must have been fraught back then. How did you find yourself swept up in these events?" I queried Zafar.

He responded, "Initially, it was more of a local festivity. But as the procession grew, so did the narrative of Hindu oppression. People's emotions ignited. It escalated to violent clashes and bloodshed. In truth, the situation became utterly uncontrollable.

"Do you believe that the Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yajna campaign gave birth to a new facet of Hinduism?" I sought Asif's perspective.

He took a moment before answering, his gaze thoughtful. "In many ways, yes, it did," he said. "Let me tell you a story from the Ram Navami festival. In Ayodhya, on the banks of the Sarayu River, amidst a sea of Ram devotees, a sadhu stood. His voice carried over the crowd, his words held a fascinating shift in thought. He used to preach 'Jota ke kanta boowe, taahi boowe to phool,' a sentiment of responding to adversity with kindness, with flowers, not thorns. But then his

narrative took a sharp turn, his words a rallying cry, 'Jo taake kanta boowe, taahi boowe to bhala.' This was a call to arms, a call to respond in kind. If someone sows thorns for you, you sow a trident. It was a stark revelation, a startling call for reciprocation, as if to say, 'if they don't understand peace, let them understand pain.'"

"And that slogan, it also gained popularity during those rath yatras: 'Bacha bacha Ram ka, Janmabhoomi ke kaam ka,'" Zafar interjected, his voice echoing the rhythmic cadence of the chant that had once filled the air.

"Indeed," Asif acknowledged, the weight of the situation evident in his words. "A militant form of Hinduism is at its peak. Remember the Dharma Sansad in Udupi last year? There, 'Shiva shakti ka jaap karo, apni raksha aap karo' was chanted – there was a gathering of half a million, including nine hundred sadhus from various sects. They made a collective vow to put aside their differences and emerge from their ashrams and maths to construct a new Hindu nationalism. Ashok Singhal has claimed that such a display of Hindu unity hasn't been seen in the last six hundred years of India's history. Currently, all of Uttar Pradesh is like a ticking time bomb. We hear constant distressing news from Meerut, Moradabad, Sambhal, Barabanki, and Kashi Mathura. The government also appears helpless against this combative Hinduism." Asif's voice carried a note of worry.

"Helpless? Not quite," Sajjad countered, his tone heavy with incredulity. "The government is more than a mere spectator, it's a participant in this crime. You seem to have forgotten how Mrs. Gandhi herself allied with Shiv Sena in Maharashtra's Panchayat elections just a mere two years ago. Even Mrs. Gandhi was present, with all her political prestige, at the 'sthapana' ceremonies of Bharat Mata in the sacred city of Haridwar in 1983."

He continued, a bitter edge to his voice. "Then there's Dau Dayal Khanna, once a minister in Uttar Pradesh, a proud figurehead of the Congress party. He didn't hesitate to write to Mrs. Gandhi, professing a so-called divine revelation. He claimed that the time was ripe to

liberate and return the revered Hindu worship sites of Ayodhya, Varanasi, and Mathura back to the Hindu community. So, tell me again how the government is 'helpless'?"

"What a narrative they spin!" Zafar exclaimed, a note of sarcasm echoing in his voice. "At times, they assert to receive divine revelations. On other occasions, their deity seemingly manifests itself within the mosque under the cover of darkness. And then, out of the blue, they can pinpoint the precise location where, as per their belief, their god Ram was birthed."

With a wry chuckle, he continued, "That location seems to have a whimsical quality to it. Up until recently, they designated a platform outside the mosque, the 'Ram Chabutra', as Ram's birthplace. Continuous chants of Ram's name would echo there. Now, abruptly, their 'Ram Lalla' has established residence within the mosque itself."

Pausing for effect, he went on, "There's a term in medical science, primarily used for mental patients, known as 'confabulation'. It's when due to some form of brain trauma, the patient begins to weave their own reality. Consider, for instance, a person who's been confined within a room from morning till night. They might narrate their day to you, claiming they've returned from a leisurely stroll along the seashore, how the weather was spectacular, and they took pleasure in catching up with old friends. They aren't being deceptive in their assertions, despite you knowing that they haven't stepped out of their room all day and the fact that the sea is nowhere near the city they inhabit. It's a rather pitiable state of affairs."

"You're spot on," Asif acknowledged. "In my opinion, the fabrication of new 'facts' about certain mythical characters, indeed, belongs to the same category. It's well understood among the intellectual Hindu community that Ram is not a historical figure. Some researchers suggest his time was during the Treta Yuga, approximately a million years ago. Other historians place him in the fourteenth or fifteenth century BCE. However, nobody can definitively assert that the current Ayodhya is the Ayodhya of Lord Ram. When it's difficult to

establish concrete details about Ayodhya itself, the identification of his birthplace becomes even more problematic."

"As for the claim that the Babri Masjid was erected on the birthplace of Ram, this is also not accurate. Tulsidas, in his epic Ramcharitmanas, does not make any such assertion."

"Who was this Tulsidas?" Zafar inquired.

Asif elucidated, "He was a contemporary of the time when the Babri Masjid was constructed. The year of the mosque's construction was 1528 AD. Tulsidas was a young man of thirty at that time. He resided in the current Ayodhya and composed his magnum opus, the Ramayana, there. If the Babri Masjid had indeed been established on Ram's birthplace, Tulsidas, as a devoted admirer of Ram, would not have omitted to mention such a distressing event."

"Indeed, you're right. We've strayed from the central issue," I steered the conversation back on track, "You haven't yet enlightened us on what steps we should take amid this volatile state of affairs." I nudged Asif, hoping his wealth of knowledge would shed some light on the path forward.

"Yes, you're correct," Asif conceded, "I excel in critique and analysis with scholarly finesse. I may not have a parallel in that field, but I often stop short of prescribing solutions." Zafar attempted to infuse some levity into the situation with a lighthearted jest.

"However, analysis is of great importance," Sajjad interjected, "Accurate diagnosis is akin to having half the treatment already."

"Why does everyone always expect me to have a solution for every issue?" Asif posed with a tinge of mild irritation. "I don't claim to be a seer. However, I will assert this much: we should refrain from doing what the Action Committee is doing, whether consciously or unconsciously, in relation to the Babri Masjid issue. On one side, we have the meticulously strategized initiatives of the revivalist Hindus,

cultivated over years. On the flip side, we are responding impulsively to provocation, and meeting their slogans with counter slogans. By acting this way, we are inadvertently playing into their hands."

With a sudden glance at his watch, Asif seemed taken aback. Rising from his seat, he requested permission to depart and proposed, "Let's deliberate on our next course of action at a more opportune time." With those closing remarks, I bid my friends goodbye.

38

Buildings Breathing Secrets

The bookshop was a vast repository of literature on traditional Unani medicine and homeopathy. Recently, I was engrossed in a book discussing Hemiplegia. This ailment, often a consequence of brain injury or damage to the spinal cord, profoundly incapacitates the patient. Should the right hemisphere of the brain suffer damage, the left side of the body becomes paralyzed, and vice versa. Tragically, the patient is often unaware that their body can no longer implement the directives of the brain. They attempt to move but are thwarted by an insurmountable obstacle. It's as though the brain persists in a bygone reality, disregarding the paralysis of its physical counterpart, until it is jarringly faced with the bitter truth - its muscles have betrayed it. This revelation can usher in a severe bout of despair.

While exploring the intricacies of this condition, my thoughts, mysteriously, kept drifting back to the Babri Masjid Action Committee's fiery declarations. The leaders of the committee seemed to contribute little beyond their inflammatory rhetoric. It was as if they were symptomatic of Hemiplegia, blissfully unaware that their faculties of action and strategic planning had been long paralyzed. Their proclamations were invariably laced with incendiary language, yet conspicuously missing was any inkling of practical strategies or anticipatory planning.

Today, as the word 'confabulation' escapes Sajjad's lips, it's as if certain medical terms possess the power to validate social and political realities in all their complexity, leaving the mind utterly bewildered. Extremist Hindus have not only conjured a new universe of hypothetical facts under the spell of an intellectual confabulation, but they have also masterfully cast the oppressed as the oppressor. Since independence, the status of Muslims in every aspect of life has been on a downward spiral; yet, the cunning minds of these individuals have twisted the narrative of Muslim oppression to the point that the entire

country now echoes with cries of 'Hindus are in danger.' They have seized our mosque, and the propaganda machine claims that Ram Lalla is held captive within its iron gates. Hindus are barred from paying homage to their deity. Ram is paraded behind iron bars throughout the country during Rath Yatras, persuading ordinary, unsuspecting Hindus to believe that Ram is imprisoned in his own homeland, while efforts are underway to implement a new 'Muslim Women Bill' for the appeasement of Muslims. I couldn't help but ponder the sheer injustice of it all; Muslims, who have been living in constant fear for the past forty years, now find themselves accused of perpetrating the supposed oppression of Hindus. This, my friend, is the art of Chanakya's strategy.

One day, feeling energized and in high spirits, I ventured into the bookshop just to see what was going on there. I found Abdul Moeiz engrossed in reading an article by A.G. Noorani to my father. As he read, he would skillfully interject his own commentary after a few sentences. He remarked, "Look how masterfully Noorani Sahib has exposed the truth behind the divine manifestation." He cited a radio message sent on December 23, 1949, at 10:30 am from the District Magistrate's Office to Chief Minister Govind Ballabh, the Chief Secretary, and the Home Secretary. The content of the message was as follows:

'Some Hindus entered the Babri Mosque at night when it was deserted and placed an idol inside. The District Magistrate, Superintendent of Police, and police force are on the scene, and the situation is under control. During the incident at night, fifteen police personnel were on duty; however, it appears that they made no substantial effort to prevent it.'

Abdul Moeiz burst into laughter, saying, "Lies have no legs to stand on. The amusing part is that even in the FIR registered by the local police, there is no mention of any divine manifestation. Sub-Inspector Ram Dubey filed the FIR at the Ayodhya Police Station on December 23, 1949. According to the FIR:

'Mata Prasad states that when he arrived at the Janmabhoomi site at 8 am, he discovered that around fifty-six people had either broken the lock on the Babri Mosque's outer door or climbed over the wall to gain entry. Inside, they placed an idol of Lord Ram and inscribed 'Sita Ram' on the inner and outer walls using garlands of colors. Hans Raj, who was on duty at the time, attempted to stop them, but they refused to listen. These individuals had already entered the mosque before the arrival of the PAC battalion. In the morning, the district administration arrived at the scene to assess the situation. Subsequently, a gathering of five to six thousand people assembled, who sang hymns and chanted slogans, but they were stopped. Ram Das, Ram Shakti Das, and the other fifty-six people successfully entered the mosque, desecrating its sanctity. Government officials on duty and others witnessed these events; therefore, this account is documented and filed.'"

"Now, with these documented testimonies at hand, how can the VHP assert the divine manifestation with any credibility?" Abdul Moeiz said, glancing at my father.

''You know, the actual issue isn't even about these so-called manifestations. These claims are like whispered secrets, pieces of public propaganda meant to rouse the masses. The real heart of the matter is their nagging unease with the existence of Muslim historical buildings, which they see as constant reminders of Muslim identity. They feel like these structures echo the whispers of the historical greatness of Muslims at every corner of the country. Their dream? To wipe these symbols of Muslim identity off the face of the earth and resurrect Hindu symbols and historical monuments as proud replacements. Just take a look back – this campaign started with a fiery passion right after independence. The way the Somnath temple was restored at the government level, you'd think the British didn't leave in 1947, but instead, the rule of Mahmud Ghaznavi had just ended."

I couldn't help but wonder, "Did secular Hindus try to put the brakes on this hate-driven campaign?"

He sighed, "Well, in practice, Hindus from all walks of life found themselves tangled up in this program, either willingly or just by circumstance. But there are some shining exceptions, like Akshay Brahmachari, the Secretary of the Faizabad District Congress. He courageously fought for the restoration of the Babri Mosque to its original status after it had been sealed off. Nehru too had his moments, expressing strong dissatisfaction with the provincial government after the incident. But despite all these efforts, Muslims were pushed out of the mosque, and the idol of Ram Lalla found its new home there."

"Maybe if Gandhi were alive, things would be different," I remarked.

My father replied, "Indeed, this would have been a significant moral challenge for Gandhi, but what could he have done? It was probably in November 1947, right after independence, when Gandhi mentioned 137 mosques in Delhi during his prayer meeting at Birla House. These mosques had either been demolished or converted into temples. Nehru had also written a letter to the Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel, protesting the situation, but these efforts didn't change anything. Muslim historical buildings have been a constant thorn in the side of narrow-minded Hindus since independence. These structures weren't just some brick-and-mortar fantasy. They were an embodiment of Muslim history.

In Delhi, while Muslims were being killed and their properties were being taken over by refugees from Pakistan, and their lives, wealth, and honor were at stake, Muslims sought refuge in these very historical buildings. Nearly 150,000 to 200,000 Muslims became refugees in their own city, taking shelter in these historical structures. Many narrow-minded Hindus felt that as long as these buildings existed, the cleansing of Muslims from the country wouldn't be easy."

"But these buildings were spread across the country, and erasing their presence wasn't a simple task. So, what solution did they come up with? Did they just compromise with the situation?" Abdul Moeiz asked.

He replied, "They declared these buildings as 'National Monuments' – an attempt to delink them from our history."

Abdul Moeiz, surprised, said, "I never thought of it that way."

He said, "Indeed, the first attack in this series was on the Red Fort, where Nehru delivered his inaugural speech for the Independence Day celebrations at midnight. This was a significant symbolic gesture, aimed at demonstrating that, with the departure of the British, Nehru and his followers had become the custodians of the Red Fort's legacy. During that time, an English newspaper called Dawn was published in Meerut, featuring protest letters from some Muslim intellectuals. For Muslims, the Red Fort represented their political and cultural strength. When Nehru replaced the Union Jack with the flag of the new India, Muslim intellectuals felt as if they had transitioned from British rule to Hindu subjugation. These lifeless stone buildings, if you really listen, had started to speak. Sensitive hearts and minds were tuned in."

"And there is also that verse:

This realm, Islam's majestic spiritual keep,
Holds noble nations in its soil, in eternal sleep.
Their rule once held the cosmos, in justice and balance deep.”[xxxi]

Abdul Moeiz nodded in agreement.

He said, "Indeed, you've interpreted it correctly. You must have heard Maulana Azad's electrifying speech, 'Look here... the mosque's minarets lean towards you, questioning you about the pages of your history that you have misplaced. It feels like only yesterday, your caravans were performing ablutions on the banks of the Yamuna, and today, while you live here, you are filled with fear, despite Delhi being nourished with your blood.' Azad, in a stroke of brilliance, chose the steps of the Jama Masjid as the backdrop for his address, becoming the voice of those eloquent minarets. Amid the changing landscape, with Nehru assuming control of the Red Fort, Azad astutely recognized the

opportunity for Muslims to reclaim the Jama Masjid as the symbol of their national Islamic identity.

"So, Azad's impassioned speech must have stirred up a storm, right? The narrow-minded Hindus must have taken offense?" Abdul Muiz queried, with an air of intrigue in his voice.

He retorted, "Indeed, that was a period when Muslims were evacuating Delhi en masse. Their roots were being torn from the ground. There was a pervasive fear that the Jama Masjid, like many other minor and major mosques, would fall prey to foreign control. If such a calamity had transpired, it would have grotesquely distorted the visage of Hinduism. Gandhi, attuned to this reality, alluded to the symbolic historical importance of the Jama Masjid and the Red Fort in a prayer meeting in September '47. I don't recall his precise phrasing, but it should be readily discoverable in his collective works. He had posited that Delhi, being the capital of the nation, is home to both the Jama Masjid and Red Fort. These edifices, constructed by the Mughals, are now an integral part of our shared historical legacy. He questioned those advocating for the expulsion of Muslims from India, querying what they would do with the Jama Masjid once the Muslims had left. Would they attempt to seize it? Consider, he implored, the dire implications of such an action! He forcefully asserted that Muslims had rightful claim to this historical mosque. We, too, take immense pride in its architectural splendor. Would we dare bring such a monument to the ground? That could never be our destiny. In that era, Gandhi's remarks at prayer meetings consistently made headlines. Around the same period, in a similar gathering, he warned those fantasizing about converting the Jama Masjid into a Shiva temple or the Sikhs aspiring to transform it into a gurudwara. By doing so, he cautioned, they would be unceremoniously digging the graves of Hinduism and Sikhism. No religion, he asserted, could sanction such an act."

Abdul Moiz inquired, "And how did the more myopic Hindu perspective address the dilemma of these eloquent structures?"

My father shared, "One solution was to recast these edifices within a secular framework. They were to be viewed as national treasures, their roots deeply embedded in Indian nationalism, rather than in Muslim identity."

This was an ambitious endeavor in itself - to erase their cultural past, to extricate them from their historical backdrop. I attempted to dissect the question for my own comprehension.

He elaborated further, "In order to accomplish this, the layout and organization of these buildings had to be restructured, and new aesthetic frameworks had to be constructed around them. Primarily, these Islamic structures were designated as tourist destinations. Subsequently, administrative infrastructures were developed around them to facilitate visitors. As these buildings were now perceived as custodians of the new secular India's national heritage, efforts were directed towards understanding and explaining their significance from this standpoint. Consider the Taj Mahal as an example, which is not just a pinnacle of Islamic architecture but also a mausoleum. Other tombs are present in its vicinity, and there is a mosque adjacent to it. Essentially, it's a site of religious and sacred significance for Muslims. However, those who manage and promote it, and the advertisements which draw tourists from all corners of the globe, portray it merely as a sublime example of Mughal architecture and one of the world's wonders."

"Indeed, there are those who now suggest that the Taj Mahal is actually an ancient Shiva temple," Abdul Moiz observed.

With an amused smile, my father replied, "That indeed represents another layer of discourse. There exist individuals who are driven to rewrite the historical narrative of these structures. While their claims lack grounding in fact, they nevertheless gain traction through persistence and systematization. For example, P.N. Oak, a member of the Hindutva school of thought, has penned an entire book aimed at rebranding the Taj Mahal as the Tejo Mahalaya, a Shiva temple. However, such rhetoric falls short in altering the established truth.

These architectural masterpieces continue to echo their true history, although it requires a discerning heart and mind to perceive their authentic story." Shifting his gaze to his watch, he was about to rise when Abdul Moiz interjected.

"People often lambast the Mughals for focusing their energies on constructing monumental structures like the Red Fort and the Taj Mahal. They argue that our circumstances would be far more favourable today if they had instead built universities. However, I now understand that by commissioning these historical structures, they indeed accomplished something momentous," Abdul Moiz reflected.

My father's smile widened in response to this insight. "Such arguments are mere trivialities, part of a contentious propaganda that we've unfortunately succumbed to," he said. "A civilization that could erect such magnificent edifices was undoubtedly nurturing a vibrant intellectual culture. Institutions of learning were preparing individuals across various fields, for how else could such an expansive empire have been managed? Furthermore, how could such large-scale export of goods have occurred, leading to an unprecedented influx of wealth in the country? Yes, there were undoubtedly factors that contributed to the empire's decline. We should indeed examine those, but it doesn't mean we should adopt an apologetic stance in the face of our adversaries' propaganda, even when contemplating the luminous accomplishments of the Muslims in India. Well, I think we've discussed enough for today."

How do structures voice their stories, whispering age-old secrets, and as quoted by Maulana Azad, how do minarets pose queries to us during tumultuous times? My first encounter with this phenomenon occurred unexpectedly during a journey when my gaze was inadvertently drawn to the intricate details of the Agra Fort. The early morning mist hadn't entirely vanished. The fort's architectural intricacies seemed cloaked in fog, as though they were narrating a saga from a different epoch to me, as though the annals of centuries were vividly etched and abruptly unveiled before my sight.

In the dawn of love, we were aflame,
Turned to dust at the end, such is this game.[xxxii]

While traversing past the contours of the fortress, a palpable ripple of sensation coursed through my being. As my father alludes to these sentient edifices, it dawned upon me - in their seeming lifelessness, these historical structures offer an emotional refuge amidst turbulent times. They emanate a sense of being our inherent havens, ceaselessly extending their embrace towards us.

In 2005, the ripples of a cultural contention were making waves across the national press. There was an uncomfortable sense, a sensation of unease, that the Muslims were beginning to perceive the Taj Mahal - this magnificent monument, a symbol of our nation's secular legacy and a jewel of World Heritage - through the narrow lens of Islamic symbolism. This was not just about a monument, it was about an identity being questioned, challenged, reshaped.

This tension had deep roots, tracing back to the disturbing demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. That event - a stark reminder of the extremist Hindu tendencies - had stirred a profound sense of unrest among Muslims, a fear for the fate of their historical edifices. This was their history, their narrative, on the verge of being rewritten.

Much like the tragic tale of Ayodhya, the mosques in Kashi and Mathura found themselves under the looming shadow of a similar threat. Claims and counterclaims were being made, some postulating that Delhi's Jama Masjid was originally a Shiva temple, while others speculated about the Taj Mahal being a temple dedicated to Shiva or Kali.

In the face of this increasing turmoil, the UP Waqf Board was contemplating a move that could alter the course of this narrative - registering the Taj Mahal as waqf property. In 2004, Mohammad Irfan Bidar, a man from the city of Firozabad, brought this issue to the legal arena by filing a public interest litigation in the Allahabad High Court.

Interestingly, Irfan had previously, back in 1998, submitted a memorandum to the Sunni Waqf Board, urging them to take on the mantle of preserving the Taj Mahal as its rightful custodian.

This was not just about the protection of a monument, it was about safeguarding a narrative, a shared cultural history that was hanging in the balance.

The court, in its judicial wisdom, whispered directives to the Waqf Board, urging them to embark on a quest for truth and evidence. They unearthed the Badshah Nama, an ancient manuscript penned by Abdul Hamid Lahori, weaving tales of a time between 1629 and 1632. Within its pages, it revealed the secrets of Shah Jahan, who had once dedicated the Taj Mahal, its lands, and buildings as a sacred endowment, a gift to the divine.

The Taj Mahal complex, a sanctuary that cradled the main tomb, countless other graves, a mosque, and for centuries, had been the stage upon which Shah Jahan's anniversary celebrations danced. Surely, this intricate tapestry of history was enough to acknowledge the Taj Mahal as a Muslim endowment.

But fate had other plans. As the board's chairman, Hafiz Usman, navigated the labyrinth of registration and declared his intent to shepherd the administration and preservation of this endowment, a storm brewed in the so-called national press. They pointed fingers at Usman, accusing him of seeing a national treasure through the distorted lens of sectarianism. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the current custodian of the Taj Mahal, sprinted to the steps of the Supreme Court.

In the end, the court cast aside the Waqf Board's registration, and thus, the narrative of grandeur and majesty that blossomed from a Muslim tomb withered away, shackled by the chains of an allegedly secular national heritage.

Years after the incident, in a time when the epoch of Congress's Muslim Appeasement had faded and the fervent cry for a Hindu nation echoed throughout the country under Narendra Modi's leadership, a Hindu spiritual leader visited my office on a sweltering May afternoon. He had approached me in the past with initiatives to cultivate Hindu-Muslim understanding, and our countless meetings had nurtured a rapport of candidness between us. Our discourse veered towards the quest for a tranquil resolution to the Babri Masjid conundrum.

He confided, "I am not an advocate for erecting Hindu temples upon the remnants of Muslim historical edifices and sacred symbols. The crux of the matter, however, is that when ordinary Hindus lay eyes upon Muslim architectural wonders like the Red Fort and the Taj Mahal, they cannot help but feel as if they remain confined even in an independent India, as if their religious identity is somehow dwarfed in the face of Muslims."

"However, isn't it true that a certain segment of Hindus, instead of perceiving the Muslim era of rule as a shining chapter in Indian history, looks at the Muslim rulers as foreign intruders?" "Yes, indeed! You're absolutely right. It is this mindset that has created a gulf between Hindus and Muslims. The genesis of this historiography can be traced back to the British, but it gradually infiltrated our way of thinking. Consequently, Muslim-era edifices appear as symbols of subjugation to certain Hindu communities."

"Some communities? From where I stand, this approach to history has tainted the hearts and minds of numerous esteemed Hindu intellectuals and so-called secular leaders. The lightning-fast launch of the Somnath temple reconstruction movement right after India's partition, and the wholehearted participation of luminaries like Gandhi, Patel, Rajendra Prasad, and K.M. Munshi under official patronage, is a testament to the vision these individuals harbored for a new India that yearned to reclaim its Hindu roots."

He elucidated, "There's an important distinction between the physical presence of a building and the intricate politics that envelop it. Muslim rulers, during their reign, created such awe-inspiring edifices that their grandiosity and majesty continue to captivate observers even today. Following India's independence, there was a palpable desire to reframe the identity of Mughal-era structures in Delhi and British-era buildings. Renaming them was one method, but these attempts couldn't entirely erase the symbols of the Muslim era from our collective consciousness. This unease persists not only among the elite Hindus but also within the leaders of the marginalized Dalit caste. It's hard not to think that, fundamentally, the Ram Mandir issue is an earnest effort to establish a Hindu cultural and political symbol. Just last year, the monumental statue of Sardar Patel was completed in Gujarat, while the Akshardham temple in Delhi emerged as a new tourist attraction, competing for attention with the Red Fort and Jama Masjid. Essentially, this is all about the politics of architecture – a fervent endeavor to assert one's presence and significance in the colorful mosaic of public spaces."

I attempted to engage my non-Muslim guest further, "Isn't it true that a new pilgrimage site called Dalit Prerna Sthal has been established along the banks of Yamuna, just about six to seven kilometers from Akshardham?"

He replied, "Absolutely! The Dalits have been remarkably proactive in this regard. Not only in Noida but also in Lucknow, where a similar site named Dalit Prerana Kendra has been founded. Additionally, an Ambedkar Memorial featuring a towering statue of Ambedkar that draws the attention of passersby has been constructed in Lucknow. All these developments occurred during Mayawati's tenure as Chief Minister. The Dalits, too, deserve an opportunity to express their pride and heritage."

"So, do these Dalit architectural initiatives carry deeper significance?" I inquired.

He responded, "Definitely! In Hazrat Ganj, where an old statue of Gandhi once stood, a grand and intricate statue of Ambedkar has been installed nearby. This has brought the long-standing ideological struggle between Ambedkar and Gandhi into the public sphere. In Uttar Pradesh, due to the sheer number of his statues, Ambedkar seems far more prominent and enduring than Gandhi. Mayawati has been Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh four times, and throughout her tenure, she relentlessly pursued the mission of asserting Dalit presence in public spaces, regardless of her other accomplishments."

"And now, the revivalist Hindus are leading this architectural endeavor, but can the construction of an immense Ram Mandir genuinely transform the geographical and cultural landscape of this country?" I posed the question to my guest.

He replied, "The Ram Mandir has now become an emblem of faith for the majority of Hindus; they intend to use it as a symbol of triumph. However, their ultimate goal is fundamentally centered on reshaping the capital city, Delhi, under the Central Vista redevelopment project. They envision a new capital for a new India, characterized not by the architectural legacy of the British or the Mughals, but by the auspiciousness of Vedic Bharat."

His candid conversation captivated me. I realized how accurate his observations were – the Central Vista holds no less significance for the BJP than the Prerana Kendra. What could be a more extraordinary opportunity for exerting influence on public spaces and orchestrating a physical and historical transformation of Delhi? The intriguing question that remains is how the historic Muslim structures of Delhi and British-era buildings will maintain their dialogue and discourse in the face of the emerging Hindu architectural narrative.

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The Nameless Tragedy

One day, in the bookshop, a gathering of esteemed elders had assembled. The conversation swirled around the contentious Babri Masjid issue. Abdul Mateen, a cherished friend of my father's, shared his thoughts with a palpable urgency, "Hafiz Sahab! The sudden, enigmatic appearance of Ram Lalla within the Babri Mosque overnight elicits mockery and skepticism from many. They dismiss it as mere blind superstition and carry on with their lives. Yet, this event signifies an extreme manifestation of religious fanaticism—a force so unparalleled in the annals of history that it eclipses all other tales of oppression and tyranny. How, indeed, could anyone have conjured up the audacity to imbue such a frivolous and baseless notion with an air of spiritual and moral legitimacy?"

"Yes, if we buy into this argument, then we'll be left with nothing," Maulana Iftikhar Sahab Maniyarpuri sighed. He went on, "The absurdity of it all is that Doordarshan, under the watchful eye of the government, keeps fanning the flames of religious fanaticism day in and day out, and yet the government boasts about standing with the Muslims. In their quest to uphold Sharia law, they're bringing a new bill on alimony to Parliament. It's almost comical how the Board of Scholars sees Rajiv Gandhi as some sort of benevolent figure for Muslims. They're blind to the fact that it was under his directive that the lock on the Babri Mosque was opened." Abdul Mateen Sahab tried to make sense of the situation.

Meanwhile, the Congressite Muslim scholars still extol Rajiv Gandhi's appreciation for Islam and his grasp of the issue. As Zaki Sahab adjusted his glasses, he said, "Arun Nehru has made it clear that Rajiv Gandhi had the lock of the Babri Mosque opened as an attempt to strike a balance amidst the Muslim community's discontent caused by the bill for Muslim women. Have you not come across Arun Nehru's statement? When he asked the Chief Minister of UP who ordered the

opening of the Babri Mosque lock, the reply was to ask the Prime Minister. And when he questioned the Prime Minister about the reasons for broadcasting the scenes of the mosque's lock being opened and Ram Lalla's appearance on a national scale via Doordarshan, all he got in return was a cryptic smile, devoid of any clear answer." The surreal nature of the situation, the ambiguity, and the uncertainty seemed to echo through the room, a testament to the complexities of the times we live in.

The situation continues to escalate, like an emotional rollercoaster with no end in sight. My father, beads of concern forming on his brow, said, "It seems as though the matter has slipped through the government's fingers, lost amidst the tumultuous tide of public emotion."

Abdul Mateen Sahab, with a distant look in his eyes, mused, "I wonder where this wild, untamed camel will finally come to rest."

"If the camel finally settles down, we should count our lucky stars. At least then we'll have a chance to regroup and strategize anew. But the real heartache lies in the relentless cycle of Muslim exploitation. As the decades since independence march on, we find ourselves grappling with new calamities, novel forms of oppression, and a renewed sense of loss each day. How can we name this melancholy decline of the Muslim community? It seems as though these people are hell-bent on erasing even our historical monuments from this land. It now appears that the government, in a bid to incite Hindu religious fervor, is unwittingly casting a shadow over the future of Muslims in this country, leaving us with no hope for peace or security."

Indeed, the exasperating truth is that all of this is transpiring under the watch of a Prime Minister who has earned the trust of the Board's scholars, creating a truly perplexing situation. Our hardships and deprivations are veiled by a facade of appeasement. Our esteemed scholars and intellectuals, misguided by this illusion, mistake the government's duplicity for mere misapprehension. Even in these trying times, they discern a sense of victory in the introduction of the new bill. How utterly disheartening and distressing this state of affairs

is! Reason has morphed into delirium, and delirium has assumed the guise of reason, prompting Iftikhar Sahab to heave a heavy sigh.

Yes, the harsh reality is that our very existence has been enshrouded in a magnificent dome of constitutional, democratic protections and the pretense of Muslim appeasement. Trapped within its walls, our cries of pain and desperate calls for help are muffled, never reaching the ears of those outside. They remain ignorant of the genuine plight that has tormented Indian Muslims for the past forty years. "If only there were a term to encapsulate this agonizing quandary that has trapped the Indian Muslims for the past four decades," my father expressed, the burden of his words bearing down upon his spirit.

No matter what name we bestow, the severity of the predicament is clear to all of us. We are immersed in an unparalleled state of subjugation and decay throughout history.

'Well! the name carries great significance', said my father. Until an apt term is coined for this condition, people won't be able to fathom the challenges we confront. In Nazi Germany, when Jews faced genocide, they relied on words like anti-Semitism and pogrom to describe the acts. However, these terms were insufficient to convey the enormity of the atrocities. After years of diligent analysis, the term Holocaust was chosen to depict the heinous crimes inflicted upon the Jewish people. Today, the word Holocaust has become so ingrained in our collective consciousness that it instantly evokes an image of barbarism unmatched before or since.

In a similar vein, Palestinians have weathered innumerable trials and tribulations since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. They have not experienced a single day of peace and tranquility since. Palestinians refer to this situation as Nakba, meaning a catastrophic event where everything is destroyed. Now, the term Nakba brings to mind the full extent of the painful situation faced by Palestinians. The massacre of innocent Palestinians in Deir Yassin, the forced eviction from their homes and lands, the cries of helpless children, and the wailing of defenseless women are all brought to the forefront.

Yet, despite the hardships faced by Indian Muslims, we have yet to devise a term that encapsulates their suffering. This, indeed, is the pinnacle of helplessness. My father continued the conversation, extending the thread of our discussion further.

He said, "Here, even the most significant massacres are hidden under the veil of communal riots, as if two groups of Hindus and Muslims simply clashed. If that were the case, it wouldn't be a big deal. In Muslim Spain, where Muslims were subjected to murder, looting, and forced eviction, their historical buildings remained largely preserved and safe. The palaces and mosques of Granada still narrate the tale of Muslim Spain's greatness. However, our plight is somewhat different. They cannot tolerate our historical buildings, considering them a stain of the days of slavery and wanting to demolish them brick by brick. So, what name should be given to this situation that is far beyond all known forms of suffering and continues unabated? May a discerning analyst stop and evaluate it and provide an appropriate name."

On that extraordinary day, when my father's words graced my ears, an enigmatic sensation of astonishment enveloped me. From that instant onwards, my path led me through diverse lands and into the company of erudite scholars and sagacious minds. I found myself immersed in the ebb and flow of history and culture, dissecting and examining their rich and complex narratives. I bore witness to the evolution and dissolution of languages and the inception of innovative terms and phrases.

However, even after traversing the seemingly limitless realms of knowledge and wisdom, as I sat amongst the comforting presence of my compassionate mentor and forthright friend, Waqar Hussain, and our conversation meandered towards the perception of this ceaseless affliction, I was struck by the realization that my years of intellectual pursuit, the strength of my analytical prowess, and the vast expanses of the Hijazi lexicon all fell short in the face of one daunting task - conceiving a precise and apt expression to describe this inexplicable state of being.

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The Covert Circular

As I stood there, my body finally graced with the strength of recovery, I couldn't help but entertain the idea of using the warm summer months to embark on an enlightening journey to the intellectual heart of Britain. However, a multitude of tasks awaited me in Aligarh, including my M.Phil. oral examination. With a heavy heart, I bade farewell to my parents and returned to Aligarh.

Upon my arrival, I sensed an air of unease, agitation, and anxiety among my fellow students, all stemming from the contentious issue surrounding the Babri Masjid. The once sealed doors of the mosque had been opened for the darshan of Ram Lalla, and in response, a multitude of action committees had emerged across Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. Many of these groups were spearheaded by former Aligarh students, all eager for support from the very campus that had nurtured them.

The leaders of these action committees seemed locked in an intense game of one-upmanship, each seeking to outdo the other with increasingly impassioned statements and fiery declarations. The competition was fierce, as the press seemed to feed off their emotional outpourings. One prominent action committee, led by Muzaffar Hussain Kachhuchhawi, featured notable names like Azam Khan and Zafaryab Jilani. Both would go on to establish themselves as leading figures in their respective fields, with the former gaining fame as a stalwart of the Samajwadi Party, while the latter emerged as a legal and Islamic advocate of the Personal Law Board.

It was Muzaffar Hussain Kachhuchhawi himself who, in a chilling statement, threatened that if the Babri Masjid was not immediately returned to the Muslim community, the action committee would lead millions of Muslims to Ayodhya to reclaim their sacred space. And with a sense of foreboding, he warned that should they be pushed to

such an extreme, no temple standing in the path of their procession would remain unscathed.

In Muslim-majority regions, these statements were sparking an atmosphere of heightened tension. Concurrently, the media began to portray a narrative of emboldened Muslims, who, bolstered by the government's perceived concession in the Shah Bano case, were now throwing down the gauntlet to the majority class.

In Delhi, Javed Habib served as the stalwart standard-bearer of the Action Committee. At the same time, the resonating roar of Abdullah Bukhari's impassioned sermons consistently emanated from the pulpit of the Jama Masjid.

Syed Shahabuddin, who had made his political debut during the Janata Party's reign and was currently serving as the editor of Muslim India, saw himself as the most suitable representative for Muslims. Not one to be left behind in this leadership sprint, he too devised a plan. His strategy was to weave together various action committees into a liaison committee, thereby asserting his command and consolidating his influence.

The Action Committee, a project conceived by the budding leaders of Aligarh, had inadvertently been catapulted into the national spotlight. The media, sparked by the committee's incendiary speeches, framed them as the spokespersons for the Muslim community. Meanwhile, the seasoned leaders of the board, despite their routine informal conversations with the Prime Minister and significant media attention drawn by the fervor of the Shariah protection movement, found themselves eclipsed, their voices lost amidst the committee's explosive pronouncements.

Maulana Ali Mian, who was averse to a public campaign over the mosque issue, now found his counsel falling on indifferent ears. The public movement he had previously led concerning the protection of Shariah was predominantly fueled by fervor and a following that lacked a nuanced understanding of the issue at hand. Yesterday, if the

streets could teem with millions championing the cause of Shariah, then who could dissuade them from risking their lives today in the defense of the Babri Masjid? The habit of thorough analysis and deliberation before any action was neither practiced yesterday nor seemed necessary today. The leaders of the mosque seized this fervor, this balloon inflated by the heated public movement under the banner of Shariah, and skillfully turned it to their advantage.

This storm of emotion and fervor naturally permeated the university campus, transforming it into a tinderbox of youthful sentiment ready to ignite at any moment. Amidst this volatile backdrop, I embarked on my mission to mitigate the situation. Initial dialogues were conducted with senior students, followed by the idea of involving the new Sheikh-ul-Jamia in the endeavor. Until that point, I had not had the opportunity to formally meet with the new Vice-Chancellor, Syed Hashim Ali. We scheduled a meeting, and an invitation to tea was cordially accepted by me and a group of fifteen to twenty senior students.

The setup in the Vice Chancellor's lodge had morphed, a far cry from what it used to be. The spot on the left of the long corridor, previously dominated by Syed Hamed Sahib and his miniature desk-cum-office, now played host to a formidable conference table - its surface shiny, intimidating, a giant in the room. Fifteen to twenty chairs huddled around it, like devoted disciples around their revered guru.

As our group trickled into the lodge, punctuality our only armor, we barely got a moment to breathe, to settle into the unfamiliar setting, before the rear door swung open and in swaggered Hashim Ali Sahib. His stature was a force to be reckoned with, a presence that demanded respect and undivided attention - a human embodiment of the conference table itself.

He took his place at the head of the table, the sovereign's throne, and without wasting a beat, his voice echoed in the room, "So, which rules do you want me to break?" He looked at us, a presumptive glint in his eyes. He was convinced we were there with a list of student demands,

armed with grievances about exams, admissions, or the never-ending hostel issues. After all, in his mind, what more could a pack of student leaders possibly want to discuss?

The surprise that washed over him was palpable when he realized we were there to talk about something much bigger. We came to him with the Babri Masjid issue, an issue that was sowing seeds of anxiety and uncertainty among the youth. We were there, not with a list of demands, but with a desire to engage him in our thoughts, our worries about a future that seemed to be hanging in the balance.

Syed Hashim Ali, upon hearing our qualms, wore an expression of genuine surprise. "Just before you arrived," he began, his voice steady, "there was a delegation of professors who made every effort to paint you in a negative light, to shroud you in suspicion. The majority of the faculty here, they shirk their duties, are incompetent, and corrupt. They all have their hands dipped in politics. If only they could grasp the weight of their responsibilities."

As he continued speaking, he rose from his chair, ambling into an adjoining room to fetch a file brimming with typed documents. "I am a product of this system, a victim," he admitted, his tone laced with a mix of resignation and bitterness, "In the dawn of independence, when I was a cog in the bureaucratic machine, the Government of India circulated a covert directive prohibiting Muslims from holding important or sensitive positions."

Intrigued, I asked, "Could you direct us to any source or evidence regarding this?"

"I've mentioned this in one of my articles," he replied, the lines on his face deepening, "among many other issues." He passed me a copy of his recent publication, adding, "This piece centers around the theme of national integration."

In the beginning lines, the author looked back on his 26-year-long career in the civil services, underscoring the fact that the idea of

national unity would be nothing but a fallacy if every citizen of India didn't feel safe. If one did not view oneself as a respected citizen of the country, if one wasn't given the chance to participate in national matters, and if one's presence wasn't acknowledged in the national narrative, then the concept of 'national integration' would remain a pipe dream.

He also made reference to a letter he had penned in his capacity as Vice-Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University to the Vice-Chancellor of Banaras Hindu University, in which he advocated for a collaborative front of scholars and artists in concert with Aligarh. In his view, given the current volatile conditions, which were increasingly spiralling out of the control of politicians and religious leaders, university faculty members needed to step up and play a pivotal role. His article was a trenchant critique of the PAC's anti-Muslim tendencies and registered a complaint with the National Integration Council, highlighting that Muslims frequently found themselves at the receiving end of police brutality during periods of social unrest. Post-conflict, they were often ensnared in a web of legal issues, a scenario he suggested was purposefully perpetuated by governmental mechanisms. The National Integration Council, in his opinion, had also consistently fallen short in taking substantive steps to alleviate the grievances of Muslims.

His contention was that if a covert circular could once inhibit Muslim officers from being positioned in sensitive roles, then why could a new directive not be introduced now? Such a directive could serve to reinstate the faith of Muslims in the system, especially since the existence of the initial covert circular is now common knowledge.

I had several subsequent encounters with Mr. Hashim. He was a man of utmost honesty and integrity, known for his directness. His tendency to speak his mind candidly, without any circumlocution, occasionally seemed incongruous within the somewhat submissive atmosphere of Aligarh.

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The Nimrod's Inferno

My trip to London. It loomed large in my mind, filling every corner with anticipation and uncertainty, its pulsating presence unavoidable. On one hand, there was the country's political climate, a wild untamed beast brimming with excitement. On the other, academia's endless dance, its rhythm relentless and captivating, demanding my attention. The timing of the journey? An enigma. A puzzle refusing to be solved.

One night, post-Isha prayer, I found myself anchored against the wall on my prayer mat. Thoughts swirled, the world began to blur as sleep subtly tugged at the edges of my consciousness. Half-awake, half-asleep, I was in a world of my own. I was praying, my feet inching towards the Kaaba, an invisible force pulling me towards the sacred structure. A sensation washed over me, a peace so profound it was tangible, palpable. I found myself beyond the Hateem, at the Maqam-e-Ibrahim. But wait, the Kaaba was behind me, my prayers lay ahead. A kind soul alerted me to my misplaced Qibla, which I immediately adjusted.

When I woke, the dream clung to me, vivid and intense. It was like a painting, every stroke, every detail burned into my mind. The meaning? I was unsure. But its clarity? Unforgettable. A divine sign, maybe? Could it be that God was summoning me to His house?

It was Hajj season, the holy pilgrimage was in full swing, and the ritual of standing on Arafat was about ten to fifteen days away. The following day brought the news of my cousin, Hussain Zulqarnain's arrival in Delhi. A meeting was in order. He was staying with his friend, Abdul Razzaq Kashmsiri, who, serendipitously, was the second secretary at the Saudi Embassy. As the conversation flowed, it veered towards Hajj and the increasing responsibilities at the Saudi Embassy. An idea took shape in my mind - why not reroute my London-bound journey via Jeddah? Kill two birds with one stone, perform Hajj en

route? This thought brought to mind a playful anecdote involving Sir Syed's departure for London, and how Akbar Allahabadi had jestingly chided him, saying:

"Kaaba calls the Sheikh, and so he'll heed,
While to England's shores, my path will lead.
He yearns for God's home, in reverence bowed,
I seek His majesty in the English crowd."[xxxiii]

"What if," I pondered aloud, "I could intertwine the blessing of the Hajj into my impending journey to London? In a single voyage, I might behold the divine sanctuary and the splendors of His world." A query found its way to Abdul Razzaq, "With the Day of Arafah barely ten to twelve days away, is there a glimmer of hope for securing a Hajj visa at this eleventh hour?" His answer came swiftly and positively, "Absolutely, why not? Just bring your passport to the embassy tomorrow morning, and let's set the wheels of this journey in motion."

As the prospect of Hajj materialized in a sudden and unforeseen manner, there wasn't any time to immerse myself in traditional preparations or to leaf through books about the intricacies of Hajj rituals. This was the pilgrimage of a student, a seeker of knowledge. With a humble bundle, I stood poised for the journey – a solitary traveler, unaccompanied by any caravan or devoted followers. A world of mysticism and spiritual yearning enveloped me, holding me in its gentle embrace.

In this enchanted world, I found myself at the summit of Jabal al-Rahmah, where I encountered a group of Afghan mujahideen, their voices raised in passionate supplication, calling for divine support and the ultimate triumph of Islam. I felt as if my very essence became entwined with their prayer, and in that moment, it seemed as if the universe was on the precipice of showering mercy and protection upon the faithful. It was there, on that very peak, that the idea of penning a treatise titled Ghalba-e-Islam, or "Victory of Islam," was born, and within my heart, a multitude of plans for the future flickered to life.

Lost in this transcendent realm, I chose to leave behind the long queues of buses and embarked on a journey by foot from Mina to Mecca. Upon completing my Hajj, as I found myself soaring toward London, I remembered that haunting dream where I had left the Holy Kaaba behind, walking away while immersed in prayer.

Six months later, as I returned from my London voyage, I found myself engulfed in a maelstrom of emotions as Muslims in the country were in upheaval over the restoration of the Babri Masjid. On the other side of the spectrum, the revivalist movements charged towards a final and decisive battle with fervor and organization. The revivalists enjoyed the support of the government and the law enforcement machinery, while Muslim leaders were armed only with inflammatory rhetoric in this strategic standoff.

The press played its part, amplifying the voices of the Muslims just enough to justify the aggressive plans of the revivalist Hindus. It was in December 1986, when I found myself back in Delhi, the echoes of the All India Babri Masjid Conference still ringing in the city's air. The conference had brought together various factions under one banner, giving birth to the ten-member Babri Masjid Liaison Committee, led by Syed Shahabuddin.

The committee enjoyed support from the Babri Masjid Action Committees of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, as well as the Babri Masjid Restoration Committee of the Muslim Majlis Mashawart. In this way, it became an international united front, building upon the fervor that the Personal Law Board had cultivated around the protection of Shariah. The Babri Masjid leaders harnessed this religious zeal for their mission, reminiscent of how Gandhi had once masterfully transformed the public movement born from the Khilafat Movement into a non-cooperation movement.

Now, the leadership was moving forward without the participation of the board's scholars. As the All India Babri Masjid Conference took place in December, the senior leaders of the board were notably absent. Maulana Ali Mian was not in favor of any public movement

for the mosque's restoration, but the leadership had progressed, prompting most national organizations and leaders to board this ship, sailing through uncertain waters.

At the heart of the Delhi conference, three pivotal choices emerged. First, a daring boycott of the Republic Day festivities on the 26th of January. Second, a spirited public rally to be convened at the Boat Club on the 30th of March. And finally, should these acts of defiance fail to bring about the mosque's restoration, an impassioned march by Muslims toward Ayodhya would unfold in October, a bold and assertive call to action.

Upon the announcement of boycotting Republic Day, an uproar ensued in the national press. Syed Shahabuddin, now the convener of the Coordination Committee, found himself amidst heated debates in every corner. Many perceived the boycott call as an act of hostility towards the nation. Advani demanded Shahabuddin's expulsion from the Janata Party, while other leaders of the mosque movement plunged into chaos.

Even though Syed Shahabuddin eventually retracted the boycott call, his central role and strategic position within the national press only solidified. The Personal Law Board's campaign for the preservation of Sharia law had also arisen as an impassioned outburst and disorganized movement. However, the spiritual and sacred aura enveloping the Board's scholars made it challenging for the general public to immediately grasp the adverse implications the Sharia movement might have on Islam's future in India.

The way leaders of the Babri Mosque vied against one another through incendiary statements and careless declarations, and the escalating struggle for Muslim national pride against the Hindus, signaled that managing this growing storm of animosity and conflict would become increasingly difficult in the days ahead. I wrote a letter to Syed Shahabuddin, drawing his attention to these concerns, but my words appeared to have no impact. In response to my letter, he wrote:

Honorable Shaz Sahib! Assalamualaikum,

I received your esteemed letter and am grateful for your prayers and kind intentions. We find ourselves at a historical crossroads. While there is a need for both passion and wisdom, we cannot rely solely on caution and diplomacy. What is required now is an unyielding passion that dares to leap into the blazing fire of Nimrod. Let us pray to Allah Almighty for guidance and His divine direction.

Sincerely, Syed Shahabuddin

The call to leap into the fire of Nimrod was not only made by Syed Shahabuddin, but also by inexperienced leaders of various action committees, and through continuous calls to combat Hindu revivalism from the pulpits of the Jama Masjid. During this period, a deputy Imam set out on a journey to Ayodhya, determined to either offer prayers inside the Babri Masjid or return as a martyr. When a journalist inquired about his expected return before he embarked on the journey, he involuntarily replied, "the day after tomorrow."

The situation had escalated to a point where it was beyond the control of the government, esteemed Muslim groups, national organizations, or religious figures to prevent Muslims from participating in this battle for national pride. This not only created the possibility of Muslims becoming entangled in an unplanned conflict, but it also contradicted the prophetic and missionary stature of the Muslim community, as they should not insist on their constitutional rights based solely on their national identity.

Halfway through March, an intriguing murmur filled the air – Syed Shahabuddin was coming. This wasn't just a visit; it was a gust of wind stirring the stagnant waters of routine, an electrical charge igniting the dry tinder of everyday life. At the heart of Sir Syed Hall's lawn, a gathering of substantial proportions was taking shape, its reverberations of 'Takbeer' lingering in the air like a tenacious perfume.

March 30th, 1987. That date now etched in the crevices of my mind, as unforgettable as the first taste of rain. That day, the Boat Club transformed. Its vast expanses became a sea of humanity, a rally of Indian Muslims that swelled and surged with a life of its own. It etched itself into the history of independent India as not just a gathering, but an awe-inspiring spectacle, a gargantuan confluence of shared faith and unity.

The times were tender, volatile, each moment dangling on the precipice of uncertainty. Travelling to Delhi was less a journey, more a game of Russian roulette. Trains and buses destined for the city wore the weight of countless suspicious gazes, each vehicle a potential target.

In this murky, unnerving ambiance, I found myself at the station, arm in arm with my friend, Muhammad Noorullah. Securing a spot on a train was akin to winning a lottery – a feat of Herculean proportions. That day, most of the trains were either victims of derailment or at the mercy of endless delays.

The Boat Club, its sprawling green fields a sight for sore eyes, was inundated with an ocean of Muslims, their presence pulsating with palpable energy. Off to the right of the stage, a banner, as large as life itself, lit up with incandescent letters, bearing a message:

"Fear not, O Muslims, for God's glory is still robust,
Islam lives on, in the Quran we trust.
These non-believers, they laugh, but what do they understand?
For the final act of Karbala is close at hand."[xxxiv]

"In a moment that felt like déjà vu, Muslims had once again converged on the grounds of Delhi, bracing themselves for a final, decisive showdown. The electrifying energy of the public was tangible, their roars and applause echoing throughout. Yet, in stark contrast, speeches from the stage whispered tales of disunity and fragmentation within the community. The leaders found themselves in a debate - who, indeed, was the true shepherd of this monumental rally? Javed Habib

put forth the notion that the Babri Masjid itself was the guiding beacon of this movement, negating the need for a singular, human figurehead.

Abdullah Bukhari, profoundly moved by the sight of this colossal gathering of Muslims, unleashed a dire warning to the government, alluding to the might he held, 'Consider the aftermath if I were to command this crowd to ignite the homes of Muslim ministers, and shatter their legs?'

In the midst of this, Syed Shahabuddin endeavored to reel in Imam Sahib. He subtly nudged his sleeve, but the Imam was not a man to be easily bridled. He forcibly shrugged off Syed Shahabuddin from the stage, expressing his disinclination to maintain any pretense when it pertained to national and communal matters.

Upon my return from this historic rally, I found myself wielding a pen, authoring a pamphlet titled 'Babri Masjid and the Indian Muslim.' It was laden with severe criticism of the reckless and myopic actions of the leaders. I wrote:"

"Oh, my dearest brothers, the Babri Masjid incident - it is certainly prophesying a future in India for you that is more horror show than dream sequence. Yet, in my humble opinion, it's your approach to its restoration that's cranking up the dial on the danger meter. You're committing a grand betrayal - using the name of God's house as a cornerstone to cement your communal conflicts. The sad part? There's no flinch, no blink as you gamble with the honor of Islam. You're all in, staking everything on your national advancement, as if history left no lessons in its wake.

This very line of thinking, this communal-centric mentality, it's what split the country into pieces like a bad break-up. You were scared, petrified of economic decay and the specter of Hindu domination in an undivided India, which made carving out a separate region seem less choice and more dire necessity.

Yet, you didn't think of the long game, did you? If Muslims leave a divided India, the echoes of 'Allahu Akbar' would fade from this land for a long, long time. And the path to spreading Allah's message to a significant population would be blocked, like roads in a snowstorm. The fallout of this limp, hobbling nationalistic thinking, the outcome of what was achieved in the name of God by the opportunists - it's a divine punishment, a retribution for a grand betrayal. I wish you'd learn from it.

These nationalists gave the enemies of Islam a golden opportunity to say, 'Look, Islam has failed in Pakistan,' when the truth is, Islam was never given a fair chance to flourish in Pakistan. From day one, the fatal error was that the organization of the Islamic nation of Pakistan was based on pseudo-national foundations rather than ideological ones. When allegiance to a nation trumps allegiance to Allah, when national interests are prioritized above everything else, it's only natural that divisions will sprout within the nation, leading to internal strife and bloodshed.

I've delved into the incident of partition in some detail because I'm hearing the same self-centered, narcissistic nationalistic chants today. Once again, loyalty to the nation, which we've conveniently labeled as 'national responsibilities,' is outpacing loyalty to Allah."

How might I persuade you that captivating nationalistic chants and the efforts invested in national interests are not the cure-all for your woes? In a particular battle of national interest, your defeat is inevitable, and, regrettably, your ethical decay has stripped you of the ability to distinguish between victory and defeat. Consider this: even if you manage to reclaim the Babri Mosque following a prolonged national struggle, what significant benefit would it bring to Islam?

Yes, it's true that you could boldly proclaim to the opposing nation that yours is a vibrant, thriving society. You could hurl contemptuous glances at others, intoxicated by your sense of national pride. But this action, which you perceive as your triumph, will, in reality, be your greatest defeat. The environment of hatred you foster throughout this

process and the extent of prejudice you nurture towards other nations— a trend already set in motion by your secular nationalist leaders— will inevitably distort your own identity.

Consequently, a large majority of Hindus, who currently hold considerable potential for embracing religious dialogue and have a desire to study Islam with an open mind, will also find themselves trapped behind the walls of Hindu prejudice. Consequently, the nationalistic reclamation of the Babri Mosque will effectively shut the door to religious discourse, understanding, and comprehension within the country for an extended period.

This chain of events will not end here. The sense of defeat within the opposing nation will breed a powerful call for revenge and hatred, and even the fortress of your constructed national prejudice will offer you no sanctuary. (pp. 11-12)

Despite the fact that this booklet strayed from the common popular sentiment, it found an extraordinary level of acceptance. Edition after edition swiftly emerged, as people procured it in vast quantities to circulate freely within their realms of influence. I began to receive letters from all corners of the country, commending my prompt recognition of our national aberration. The sumptuous prose and Abul Kalam-esque intonations led many to mistake me for a venerable sage. They even blamed me for having remained silent until now, especially considering the keen eye with which I had been observing the unfolding events.

The booklet's conclusion introduced an upcoming work titled "Ghalba-e-Islam," intended to provide a lucid plan of action for those interested in organizing a Prophetic Mission within the country, rather than participating in battles for national pride. Many of the letters I received eagerly awaited the release of "Ghalba-e-Islam." In a moment of reflection, I pondered whether it was time to publish a manifesto for the revival of Islam in India under the title "Ghazwa-e-Islam," given the pervasive sense of disorientation that had befallen our people.

Hindu-Muslim animosity in the country was incessantly intensifying. Reports of minor and major riots, as well as mounting Hindu-Muslim tensions, emerged from various cities. In such a milieu, focusing on writing and composition proved to be an arduous endeavor. Just as the book neared its final stages, an unanticipated letter arrived, shattering my mental equilibrium. Little did I know that my ties with Meerut, a place from which terrifying news of Muslim persecution had been pouring in, would connect me to Haleem Bhai. As I delved deeper into the letter, a palpable wave of dread and disquiet seemed to permeate my very essence. The words on the page divulged:

''My dearest brother, a heartfelt greeting to you,

From the depths of a Meerut nursing home, I pen this letter, where life's unpredictable turns found me undergoing an appendectomy just a few days ago. I barely stepped beyond the confines of the operation theater when chaos erupted, with agitators demanding the expulsion of Muslim patients. Dr. Bhatnagar, the compassionate owner, stood firm in his refusal, only to see his nursing home fall victim to the mob's wrath. Property was damaged, items stolen, and in an agonizing twist of fate, my unpublished diary draft vanished amidst the turmoil. For years, I had poured my soul's anguish onto paper, never foreseeing that such a calamity would beset me.

Not long ago, your insightful booklet "Babri Masjid and Indian Muslims" found its way to me, disclosing that you remain anchored in Aligarh. In a bid to escape the relentless grip of Moradabad's police crackdown, we sought refuge in Meerut. The kindness of friends and relatives breathed life back into us, but alas, the shadows of chaos have once again darkened our doorstep. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement has awakened a monstrous side in humanity. I recall a conversation with Hakim Saifuddin while seeking medical counsel, during which he lamented that the mosque-temple dispute has ignited such hatred that even if two buffaloes were to fight, we'd brand one a Muslim buffalo and the other a Hindu buffalo, pledging our allegiance accordingly.

I confess, my dear brother, I hesitated to share the following, fearing to burden you with further sorrow. Yet, I find it impossible to keep it concealed: my youngest brother Kaleem has been missing for nearly twenty-five days. Once released from the hospital's grasp, I shall embark on a quest to find him. Some whisper he perished in the chaos; others recount how he evaded the police searching Muslim neighborhoods for weapons, fleeing by vaulting over a wall. His fate remains uncertain. Contemplating the tragedies that unfolded in Miliana and Hashimpura, his survival seems but a distant possibility. A fragile thread of hope endures, as we have become inured to bearing the weight of grief. I sometimes wonder, will God call us to account for these harrowing times? How many cataclysms must we withstand? Hatred blazes in the eyes around us, rendering this place inhospitable for human life. We now find ourselves on the precipice of relocating once more – Amroha, Moradabad, or Shahjahanpur – the path ahead remains veiled in mystery.

With a plea for your prayers,
Abdul Haleem Siddiqui"

Upon reading the letter, my heart ached with the urge to help Haleem Bhai immediately. Only a few days ago, students from Meerut and Hapur had come together, driven by empathy, to create a relief committee for the suffering souls. Through my connections, I managed to touch the hearts of several individuals who contributed generously to this cause. Arshad, the passionate spirit behind the committee, resided in my own hostel.

A few days later, as fate would have it, Arshad embarked on a soulful journey to Meerut with his companions, carrying the relief funds as a beacon of hope. It was during this journey that Arshad made his way to Bhatnagar Nursing Home, in search of the elusive Haleem Bhai. As if guided by destiny, after an extensive search that tested their resilience, they discovered that Haleem Bhai had lived in the Sheikhan neighborhood of Malyana. But now, the place lay scarred, marked by the remnants of burnt houses or echoing with the lamentations of

orphans and widows. The majority of residents, their spirits battered, had already sought refuge elsewhere.

The enigmatic tale of Malyana unfolded in a curious manner. It was whispered that life in Meerut had returned to a semblance of normalcy, the chaos seemingly tamed when, unexpectedly, Rajiv Gandhi summoned Chief Minister Vir Bahadur Singh to Delhi. He expressed his displeasure over the audacity of Hashimpura and Amalian's Muslims, who denied the police entry to their areas during the curfew. Such insolence was impossible to tolerate.

Vir Bahadur, with his words steeped in Bhojpuri and a speech impediment, painted a portrait of Meerut restored to calm. Yet the will of the Prime Minister was not to be questioned. The next day, he arrived in Meerut, flanked by the PAC officers, and lodged a complaint against the defiant residents of Hashimpura and Amalian. Due to Vir Bahadur's stammer, the police officers misunderstood him, leading to the punishment of Malyana's Muslims instead of Amalian's.

During that time, it was believed that Rajiv Gandhi had chosen Vir Bahadur Singh as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh with a particular agenda in mind. Under his guidance, the lock on Babri Masjid was pried open, the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh chastened, and as whispers of his mismanagement swirled, he was removed from his post and placed in the cabinet as the Minister of Information.

As it became evident that Vir Bahadur was fearlessly unveiling hidden secrets and growing bolder in alluding to his intimate ties with the Prime Minister, his life was snuffed out under mysterious circumstances during a visit to France just a few months later. Only the divine knows the truth, but the passing of the position of Chief Minister between ND Tiwari and Vir Bahadur seemed to indicate that Rajiv Gandhi had accomplished whatever he desired through Vir Bahadur.

42

Maulana Subhani: An Enigma Unfolding

In the aftermath of the Babri Masjid rally, a palpable sense of unease spread across the nation, particularly in various cities of Uttar Pradesh, where Muslim communities found themselves under siege, subjected to brutal violence. As the final days of Ramadan coincided with the sweltering heat of May, people couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the relentless onslaught of distressing news.

On a fateful day, upon returning from the library, I was greeted by an enveloping darkness—the electricity had vanished. In the dim light, I found my neighbors and friends, Moeen and Mujahid, sitting in the veranda with somber expressions, poring over newspapers. Pursuing their PhDs in Natural Sciences, the duo typically spent their days in the laboratory. In social gatherings, their wit and banter often filled the room with laughter, unmatched in their ability to entertain. Yet today, their demeanor was uncharacteristically heavy.

As I soon learned, the news streaming in from Meerut had exposed a new level of barbarism, one that sent shivers down our spines. Police and military forces had descended upon Muslim neighborhoods, systematically sealing them off. People were torn from the sanctuary of their homes and herded onto the streets, forced into suffocating rows. The elderly, children, young people, and women were all mercilessly segregated. In the Hashimpura neighborhood alone, 700 individuals found themselves ensnared by the iron grip of arrest. Among them, 42 young men were singled out, marked for a cold-blooded, orchestrated massacre.

In the city, over two and a half thousand young men were taken from various Muslim neighborhoods, disappearing without a trace. The number of victims grew, including those who were formally arrested and those who died in lock-ups and jails due to police brutality. When

the news of the horrifying massacre of 42 young men emerged, it sent shockwaves through the media.

Mujahid remarked that this tragic event was unprecedented in independent India—a brutal incident where Muslim youths were apprehended in a joint police and military operation, and then systematically executed by gunfire under the cover of night. Their bodies were callously thrown into the river. Villages along the riverbank, primarily inhabited by Muslims, were alerted by the sight of floating corpses, prompting them to search for any survivors. Miraculously, four individuals still clung to life and were admitted to the hospital for treatment.

Meanwhile, Babu Deen Ansari, who was left half-dead and wounded by police gunfire, got caught in a bush. The police assumed he was dead and left him there. In his final moments, Babu Deen prayed to God. In response, God sent Webhooti Narain Roy, a conscientious police officer from Ghaziabad. Sinha rescued Babu Deen, took his statement, and filed an FIR against the 41st PAC Battalion based on his testimony.

Chief Minister Veer Bahadur Singh was sleeping in Delhi's UP Bhawan when he learned about the FIR, and he became extremely anxious. According to insiders, he ran barefoot toward his car, exclaiming, "Ai to gujab hui gawa, ai to gujab hui gawa!" (This is an astonishing turn of events, this is an astonishing turn of events!). Without wasting any time, he made his way to Ghaziabad, ordered the suspension of Vibhooti Narain, and deployed police at the hospital where the survivors were being treated to prevent media personnel from entering.

The disturbing news filtering through from Miliyanah and Hashimpura had erased the smiles from the faces of an untold number of young men, including Moeen and Mujahid. Eyes that yesterday brimmed with dreams of a promising future were today haunted by a terrifying reality. Conversations among these young men, which once rang with tales of enchanting maidens, now revolved around a single,

chilling question that had taken center stage: "Will we still have a place in this country or will we be wiped out?"

Mujahid, who had only recently returned from a conference in Germany where he had confidently presented his paper, now seemed consumed by a pervasive worry. His once buoyant optimism had given way to a palpable unease. He spoke of the escalating cycle of violence, of an increasing trend of murder and looting. In his view, our national leaders had inadvertently become pawns in the enemy's hands, unwittingly fuelling the flames of conflict. It seemed as though our fervent responses were unintentionally strengthening the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

I queried, "Could you elaborate?"

He expounded, "Reflect on the Babri Masjid demonstration held on March 30th. It was heralded as the most significant Muslim assemblage in post-independence India. Provocative speeches were delivered. Hindus perceived it as the resurgence of Muslim unification. A week later arrived Ram Navami, an event Hindus utilized as a counteroffensive. The procession of Ram devotees, traversing various regions, led to the unwarranted massacre of innocent Muslims nationwide."

"I beg to differ. While the Ram Navami processions might have contributed, the real flame was kindled by the address on May 16th," Moeen proposed.

"Which address are you referring to?" I sought clarification.

"The Boat Club address," he responded.

"But the Boat Club gathering occurred on March 30th," I pointed out, seeking clarification.

He began to explain, adding another layer of complexity to the conversation. "The March 30th rally at the Boat Club is well-known.

Everyone knows about that. But then there was May 16th. Same place, same Boat Club, but a different speaker, a different audience. This time it was Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, addressing the Congress workers. His words were filled with hints of conspiracy, of external forces attempting to destabilize the country. He spoke of America arming Pakistan, of danger looming. 'We will retaliate fiercely,' he promised, 'in a way that will make them remember their ancestors.'"

"So, what you're saying is... Rajiv Gandhi was playing the Hindu card?" I asked, needing to clarify, to understand.

"It's clear as day," he replied, his words brimming with certainty. "Abdullah Bukhari's speech at the Boat Club, that was a match, lighting the fuse of Muslim passions. But Rajiv Gandhi? His speech was a call to arms for the Hindus. The message was clear: the government is serious about reminding Muslims and their leaders of their place."

"But why didn't our national leaders raise any objections?" Moeen asked, a note of confusion in his voice.

"How could they?" came the response, tinged with a hint of bitterness. "They see him as a beacon, as their guiding light. Have you ever noticed how Muslim intellectuals and Congress's Muslim leaders used to shower praises on Rajiv Gandhi's friendship with the Muslim community during the maintenance issue? Most of our Muslim leaders view him as a clear-minded, forward-thinking, Mr. Clean. But it was under his watch, with his subtle endorsement, that the Babri Masjid was reopened. The images of rituals being performed in the mosque were shown on government television, all because of his silent approval."

"Right you are," Mujahid asserted, backing Moeen's viewpoint, "A statement of that magnitude should not have been articulated by the person holding the highest office in the country."

"But this is just classic Rajiv," he continued, "He's never been one to shy away from reprimanding the underprivileged. Remember the anti-Sikh riots in 1984? The country was drowning in a torrent of violence, with the death toll of innocent Sikhs in Delhi alone surpassing three thousand. Amidst that chaos, Rajiv Gandhi, our so-called 'enlightened' and 'secular' Prime Minister, justified this horrifying massacre by stating, 'When a big tree falls, the earth shakes.' It's just how he operates."

"Unbelievable!" I exclaimed, in response to this revelation.

"I think Moeen is right," Mujahid replied, turning towards me. He then went on to add, "Both the Hindu revivalists and the ruling Congress party have become partners in this campaign to remind Muslims of their 'place'. Just the other day, I was in Delhi, passing through the Darya Ganj area, when I saw a scooter rickshaw carrying huge banners with inflammatory slogans like 'Is baar Eid kaisi hogi? Moradabad jaisi hogi' (How will this Eid be? Like Moradabad) and 'Jo mange ga Babri, uska samay hai akhiri' (Anyone who demands Babri, will meet their end). There was a small group of saffron-clad young men following the rickshaw, blaring provocative songs and sloganeering through a loudspeaker. It felt like a new riot was about to erupt any moment. The fear was palpable. It's only when you step outside the campus that you realize how thirsty the world is becoming for our blood."

Mujahid's conversation was still unfolding like a blooming flower when the familiar rhythm of footsteps intruded upon our sanctuary. "Ah, Subhani Uncle! What an honour to have you here!" Moeen's voice lifted, brimming with a warm surprise. "You haven't given in to the enchanting lull of sleep yet?" Maulana Hassan Subhani was an enigma shrouded in the tapestry of many tales. He had strolled into the university, chasing after his PhD ambition when he had already journeyed through seven decades of his existence. He was the offspring of a revered mystic, a man who had etched his mark by standing resolute against the violation of the Machhli Bazaar Mosque in Kanpur, even embracing the icy touch of imprisonment for his

audacious activism. He had been a beacon in the Pakistan Movement, but witnessing the post-partition anguish of Indian Muslims had anchored his heart, compelling him to stay. Subhani's room was just a whisper away from ours. Whenever our paths would intertwine, he would greet us in his ornate, pristine Urdu, a language he shielded fiercely from the encroachment of English.

Today, Subhani Sahib seemed particularly perturbed, even agitated. He began, "I don't know what the government wants. The situation is spiralling out of control. I fear a major incident may occur during the Eid gathering."

"But this time, a decision has been made to celebrate a subdued Eid," Mujahid clarified.

He retorted, "Every Eid in this country has been subdued, even mournful since independence. But people will still gather, won't they? I've heard that the slogans of Moradabad are being echoed."

"Yes, indeed! And all this is happening under the direct supervision of the government. Haven't you heard the speech that threatens to recreate a situation so dire that Muslims will nostalgically recall the safety of their grandmother's lap?" Moeen interjected.

He lamented, "Oh brother, it seems the conditions akin to the partition of India are re-emerging. I've heard that Muslims are being identified through the passenger list in trains."

"But we've discovered a clever workaround to this predicament," Mujahid disclosed, his face illuminated by a sly, impish grin. "You're familiar with Abdullah, aren't you? The one from Gorakhpur who's engrossed in his Hindi research. He's ingeniously written the Hindi version of his name on his train ticket."

"Really now? What might that be?" I couldn't help but ask, intrigued by the revelation.

"He's devised an extraordinarily sophisticated and apt translation. He's penned down: Bhagwan Das."

"So, our esteemed Mr. Abdullah has reinvented himself as Bhagwan Das, has he? I should pay him a visit to hear more about this," Subhani Sahib responded, feigning astonishment at the transformation, a playful chuckle in his tone.

"And why not?" Mujahid defended, infusing more gravity into his discourse. "If for the sake of averting strife, we accept being called Om Prakash instead of Noorullah, or if Salma Begum responds to being addressed as Shanti Devi, we'd also be transcending the language divide in the process."

He pondered, "This issue, so fragile and intricate, is intertwined with language and the culture that accompanies it. For conquerors, adapting the language to our preferences seems effortless. But when the conquered are forced to change their identity under the sword's menace, the process inflicts an internal psychological wound." Subhani Sahib paused for a moment, as if struck by a sudden thought. Continuing, he said, "In truth, this endeavor should have been undertaken long ago. Just as Muslims 'Islamized' the prayers and fasting of the Zoroastrians, if only terms like 'Dhyan,' 'Gyan,' 'Pooja Paat,' 'Vrat,' and 'Yatra' had been Islamized in due course, today's circumstances would be different. We've essentially imprisoned Islam within an Arab mold. Nevertheless, this topic is distinct, and there will be time for discussion in the future." With those words, Subhani Sahib rose to his feet, and the gathering came to its end.

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Delhi: A Land of Haunting Heartbeats

For two and a half months, we were submerged in an ocean of relentless turmoil, our hearts heavy with the weight of countless violent incidents. Each day brought more news of bloodshed and strife from various cities, painting a bleak picture of our country's landscape. It was during this time that I finished penning the book "Ghalba-e-Islam", a small beacon of hope amidst the chaos. Filled with dreams of publishing it, I planned my journey to Delhi.

As I stepped out of my room, fate revealed another tragic incident: eleven Muslim passengers had been pulled off the Meerut-Bijnor bus and mercilessly slaughtered. My friends, concerned for my safety, attempted to convince me not to travel. I couldn't help but recall that harrowing night when I had barely managed to squeeze into a train compartment, determined to join the Babri Masjid rally. With each late arrival and unexpected stop at smaller stations, the looming dangers intensified, the constant drumbeat of fear never far from my mind. Yet, with the understanding that this was now the harsh reality of our country's nights and days, I bravely set off for Delhi. Upon arriving, I was struck by the sight of large black banners adorning the main entrance of the Jama Masjid. They bore powerful words of protest against the massacre of Muslims and the injustices they were facing. The mosque's minarets were veiled in black cloth, casting an air of solemnity over the scene and sending a clear message that the Muslim community in this country was enduring difficult times. Their emotions were raw, their hearts burdened, and the Jama Masjid was a site of mourning for this delicate situation.

I discovered that shortly after Ramadan, Imam Abdullah Bukhari of the Jama Masjid, his heart heavy from the Meerut riots, had made the decision to close the mosque's doors to worshippers and visitors in protest. For two long weeks, the mosque remained off-limits to both worshippers and tourists. Eventually, the government's assurances that

the guilty officers would be held accountable and the oppressed Muslims would find relief led to the reopening of the Jama Masjid. Yet, the black cloth that still enveloped the minarets served as a poignant reminder that—

The heart of Delhi's land is burdened with sorrow,
In every speck, the dreams of our ancestors' blood do follow.

As I stepped through the grand entrance, my gaze was drawn to a donation box, a lifeline for the financial sustenance of Adam Sena. The name had reached my ears only last year, yet throughout these riots, this budding organization seemed to lack any tangible presence in the form of resistance or defense. But now, with the donation boxes hanging in the Jama Masjid, it became clear that not only did this group exist, but it also stood as a solitary pillar of support for Muslims when confronted with the fierce ambitions of outfits like Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Had Adam Sena not materialized, even as a merely symbolic organization, the media might have found it difficult to balance the narrative. How else would they have portrayed this struggle, which in truth pitted state machinery against vulnerable Muslims, as a Hindu-Muslim conflict?

The government's strategy to instill fear in Muslims by threatening to create a situation that would ‘make them yearn for their grandmothers' comforting laps’ was executed with remarkable precision and effectiveness. The impact of this campaign could be gauged from the heart-wrenching testimonies of the oppressed victims who appeared before tribunal members in Meerut and Delhi in March 1988. Hashimpura's Muhammad Usman recounted his harrowing experience in the following manner:

... on 22.5.87 evening at about 6 p m the PAC, the military and the police arrested me and everyone from our neighbourhood and made us sit on the road side. As I was watching they took away three of four truck loads of people from our mohalla and sent back home the old and the children. Lastly I with about 50 people from our mohalla were left

when the PAC commander who had a mike ordered that we all be put in the truck. With me in the truck were Kadir Chaiwalla, Haji Mustaqeen, Haji Shamim, Naeem, Rizwar, Abdul Haq, and others whom I know by face but do not know by name. We were stuffed inside the truck and I was made to sit right inside. That is why I do not know which way the truck went. The truck stopped at one place and two or three PAC men got down and the truck started again. It kept going and I wondered why we had not reached the Civil Lines police station.

The truck took a right-turn and went on a curve when I heard one of the people from our mohalla saying that there is the Muradnagar canal. After this the PAC took one man out of the truck, shot him and threw him into the canal. Then they took out a second man from the truck, shot him and threw him into the canal, and like this the third man was also shot dead. At that time the rest of the people said we should remember god because PAC is going to kill us all. Everyone stood up, at which time the PAC peppered us with bullets and those who were saved were also shot dead and thrown into the canal. One man fell over me and that is why I was not hit by a bullet. Then two PAC men picked me up and I started crying and pleaded with them to spare me because I had two very small children and old parents. At that time a third PAC man came towards -me pointing a rifle and I caught the barrel and pointed it away from me and two or three seconds passed in this confusion and he put the gun on my stomach and shot. I shouted that I had been killed and those PAC men thought I was dead and threw me into the canal.

After I was thrown into the canal, I tried to swim but my legs would not work and with great difficulty I reached the bank. I caught the grass and pushed myself to the bank. When the PAC truck went away I came out of the canal and sat down ... I reached the metalled road. Two Bihari artisans (who had been shot) were already there. After that two trucks passed by and I tried to stop them but they did not stop. . . A little later some policemen came by on a motor cycle. I signalled to them with my hand so they stopped. I told them that the PAC people

had shot us and thrown us into the canal and the police said they would return with a jeep. One policeman stayed with us. The policemen said if I gave such evidence my life would be in danger, so I should say that I had come to my door to see my brother when the riots broke out and I was shot at my back and I do not know who shot me... During my treatment at the All India Medical Institute there was a CID man who stayed near me and who would not allow any journalist to speak to me. In this period whoever met me I told them the same story that the policemen had told me to tell because I felt my life was under threat ... (quoted by K Balagopal in EPW, April 16, 1988)

Several youthful individuals apprehended from Hashimpura met their end either due to the vicious assault by the police or as a consequence of succumbing to their injuries within the confines of Fatehgarh Jail. Parvez Ahmad, a firsthand witness of the heinous police brutality who also possessed a Master's degree in Economics from Meerut University, unveiled the horrific truth of this event with his words:

I, Kamaruddin and Shiraj Ahmed were at the residence of Nasruddin, No 9, Bageecha Mohd Hussain. At about 5.30 p m army entered the house and arrested me, Kamaruddin, Shiraz Ahmed, Mohd Nasru and Salim and took us to the main road. We found many other residents of the mohalla were also taken there... Major Pathania and a Sikh captain were in charge of this operation. I was put on a truck, in which Moinuddin was also taken and we were all taken to the Police Lines. When the truck arrived at the Police Lines, it was surrounded by the PAC and they started beating us while we were in the truck. The truck was open frojn all sides. So there was a stampede inside the truck as we were moving from one side of the truck to another to save ourselves. Moinuddin fell down and was severely in- jured in the stampede. We were detained at Police Lines for about 2-3 hours and then taken to Civil Lines police station. There we were dragg- ed out of the truck one by one and beaten mercilessly. In this beating Moinuddin, Zaheer Ahmed and Meenu became un- conscious and were dragged out and kept under a tree. It was around 11 p m at night.

I think they succumbed to their in- juries and died some time later. In the early morning, around 4 a m, the police took the three bodies away from that place... Due to severe beating both my legs were fractured... (op. cit)

Incarcerated by grief, these innocent young Muslims found no reprieve even within the austere, cold walls of the prison. The relentless torment followed them like an ominous shadow, pervasive and inescapable. A glimpse into this tragic narrative was offered by Tajuddin, son of Shamsuddin, a man who found himself ensnared within the foreboding confines of Fatehgarh jail. He painted a picture of his experiences, an emotional tableau etched in the language of sorrow and despair, as follows:

On 24.5.87 evening I and my compa- nions were taken to the Civil Lines police station. From there some of us were sent to Fatehgarh jail and we reached there on the morning of 25.5.87 at about 7 a m. As soon as we entered Fatehgarh jail the old convicts and the police beat us badly with lathis as a result of which Deen Mohammed died at that time. Hanif Khan and Jamil Ahmed, two people who came to the jail in another truck, and Md Salim died the next day on 26.5.87 at the Fatehgarh jail hospital. I was asked to identify the bodies of Deen Mohammed, Hanif Khan and Jamil Ahmed and I iden- tified these people's corpses. I saw Mohammed Osman who had come in another truck in Fatehgarh jail, with both legs broken. He died two days later at the Fatehgarh jail hospital...

This is the story of those who were consumed by death's cruel hand. But what of the survivors, those left to pick up the fragments of shattered lives? Shakeela Begum's narrative provides a glimpse into their world of pain. She had to hear about the death of her beloved husband, Hanif, a message conveyed with cold indifference by the police:

... On the 22nd May at about 3 to 4 p m the police (including PAC and women police) came. My husband who has been ill for the last three years, was lying inside the house. I asked the police not to take

away a sick man but they hit him in the stomach with the butt of a rifle and took him away. I showed them the X-ray photo- graphs and medical reports of my hus- band and begged them not to take him away but they dragged him out and when our 6 year old grandson obstructed them they dragged him out also. I went out and snatched my grandson and brought him back. On the 27th the PAC people came and said Hanif is not well, will somebody come? I said, you have taken away everybody, who else is there to go? I went with the PAC to the Civil Lines police station where they said we will give you a gift on the eve of Id and gave me my husband's dead body. They called me a bitch and said they had brought this gift for me all the way from Fatehgarh jail. (op. cit)

The night of Eid transformed into a night of anguish for countless Muslims, reminiscent of the night of Ashura. A staggering number of young men - approximately 2,500 - were taken from various areas of Meerut. The accounts of 42 of them became the center of newspaper stories, tied to the horrific Hashimpura massacre. The fate of the rest remained shrouded in mystery.

M.J. Akbar, a Congress spokesperson of the time who had accompanied Prime Minister Rajiv on his visit to Meerut, penned a haunting portrayal of the house-to-house search in Hashimpura. It was after Friday prayers when the police entered Abdul Majid's home. A neem tree stood in the courtyard, under which Abdul Majid and his wife were instructed to sit as the officers searched their home. With nothing else found, the police took Abdul Majid's 20-year-old son, Deen Mohammad, into custody.

The night before Eid, May 28th, was cloaked in an eerie silence. After Isha prayer, police officers returned to Abdul Majid's home with unsettling news: his son was desperate to see him in jail, urging Abdul Majid to accompany them. Worried about his son's well-being, Abdul Majid went to the police station with his friends, only to be made to wait for an agonizingly long time. At around 2:30 am, the police handed over his son's lifeless body, leaving Abdul Majid shattered.

The police gave him one strict instruction: bury his son before the break of dawn. They had already dug a grave.

As Abdul Majid arrived at the graveyard, his friends by his side and his young son's body draped for burial, he discovered that he was not alone in his sorrow. Three other fathers, bearing the same burden of grief, had come to the graveyard with the funerals of their young sons. These Muslim youth, like Deen Mohammad, had succumbed to the merciless brutality inflicted by the police while they languished in jail.

The incident in Hashimpura may have never graced the headlines of this nation if fate hadn't allowed some of the young men, tossed mercilessly into the river, to survive. Nor would it have made the news if it weren't for the timely intervention of a conscientious police officer, Vibhuti Narayan, who filed an FIR against the PAC Battalion 41. Vibhuti, at his core, was a sensitive writer, and he later penned a book called "Hashimpura 22 May."

The case trudged along, and after years of tireless efforts, the CBI and CID finally filed a charge sheet against 19 PAC personnel in the Chief Judicial Magistrate's court in Ghaziabad in 1996. Upon the victims' request, the case was relocated to a Delhi court in 2002. When the verdict finally emerged on March 15, 2015, three police officers had already succumbed to natural causes, and the remaining 16 were acquitted due to a lack of evidence.

This 27-year legal battle left Babu Deen and his three companions, who had miraculously survived the ordeal, in a haze of disbelief. Interestingly, during this time, Mulayam Singh's 'Islamic' government emerged in Uttar Pradesh, and Mayawati's friendship with Muslims became a topic of conversation. However, justice for the victims remained elusive. Vibhuti Narayan opined that Hashimpura was not an isolated, unique occurrence in this country; it was not merely an event but a reflection of a mindset. It should not be surprising, then, that sectarian conflicts generally unfolded between Muslims and the police, rather than between Muslims and Hindus.

There was a sense that the roots of the Meerut events stretched to higher levels. An ordinary sub-inspector wouldn't dare order such a massacre. Insiders whispered that when Rajiv Gandhi visited Meerut following the Hashimpura incident, cheers of "PAC Zindabad" filled the air. Mohsina Kidwai, a Member of Parliament from Meerut and a minister in Rajiv's cabinet, also visited Meerut after the incident. Yet, disappointingly, she could not muster a single word of sympathy.

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The Briefcase Preacher

The country was enveloped in a pervasive sense of unease. Muslims found themselves enmeshed in a distressing quandary. Hindu revivalism had emerged from the womb of Muslim scholars' campaign for the "Protection of Sharia." By bestowing the Babri Masjid upon Hindus as a gift in exchange for an ostensibly harmless law on alimony, Rajiv Gandhi had artfully won their favor. He skillfully plucked the arrow of Sharia from the quiver of the board scholars in such a manner that our clerics and their learned accomplices remained unaware.

On the other hand, the secular leadership of the Babri Masjid issue had unceremoniously dislodged Muslims from their ideological perch, thrusting them into a purely communitarian struggle. The irony lies in the fact that even Muslim organizations, including the Muslim Majlis Mashawarat and Jamaat-e-Islami, found themselves wholeheartedly enmeshed in this battle for communitarian pride. A prevailing sentiment suggested that those who did not display zeal for the Babri Masjid issue would be cast out from the mainstream.

As for the mosque's leaders, they had little to offer the nation beyond impassioned slogans and incendiary speeches. It seemed as though the entire nation had become ensnared within a restricting alley. In these trying times, the publication of "Ghalbe-e-Islam" kindled a glimmer of hope.

"Ghalbe-e-Islam," heralded as a manifesto for the resurgence of Islam in India, was more than just a scholarly composition; it represented a declaration of an avant-garde vision. The book came with a response card, seeking readers' personal particulars and inquiring if they were ready to back this innovative mission of Ghalbe-e-Islam. The card seemed to carry the weight of a written vow of devotion. The book was warmly embraced far and wide, with pledge forms streaming in

from various corners of the nation. Passionate Muslims from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh journeyed to Aligarh to meet me in person, their fervor palpable. Little did I imagine that people would elevate the book's author to a lofty pedestal of adoration and respect, a position generally reserved for distinguished reformers of their time. It was as if the Muslim community had been yearning for a guiding light to emerge.

One fateful day, in a quaint bookstore in the Urdu Bazaar area near Jama Masjid Delhi, word reached me that Hazrat Ji Maulana Inamul Hassan, the esteemed leader of the Tablighi Jamaat, desired an audience with the young, spirited author of Ghalbe-e-Islam. In those days, the central headquarters of Jamaat-e-Islami resided in the historic Chitli Qabar district. Afzal Hussain Sahib, the venerable secretary-general of Jamaat-e-Islami, affectionately known to us as Afzal Chacha, was customarily engrossed in his files. While his demeanor was unfailingly polite, his conversations were often succinct, giving the impression that myriad tasks awaited his attention. However, on that particular day, as I offered my salutations and attempted to move on, he set his files aside, composed himself, and sat down. He began, "The Ameer of the Jamaat has mentioned that you've been quite critical of the Jamaat. Your criticism is indeed justified; there should be an evaluation. But what can we do? We have persevered through the most trying of times to bring the organization to where it stands today."

In those days, chance encounters with Maulana Wahiduddin Khan Sahib peppered my life. His conversations swirled with critiques of Maulana Maududi. Watching the book's meteoric rise to popularity, I contemplated having it translated into Arabic and English. A senior professor of the English department, Majeeb Sahib, transformed the book into exquisite English prose. At the time, Maulana Akram Nadwi was an emerging literary talent who quickly crafted the book's Arabic incarnation. The revered Kamal Halbawi Sahib shouldered the responsibility of adorning and proofreading the Arabic translation.

Before I could grasp it, this humble book garnered such prominence that its fame shadowed my every step.

That era was an awakening, as champions of Saudi and Iranian camps sketched grand blueprints for the spread of Islam. As mentioned earlier, due to American involvement and support in the Afghan jihad, Islamic projects were seemingly viewed with admiration. In this atmosphere, working for the cause of faith, rather than courting peril, evolved into a means for many to chase worldly gains. Confronting this disquieting state of affairs, I penned the following:

Despite the overwhelming presence of numerous Islamic institutions, associations, and organizations, it remains a perplexing enigma as to why the Islamic movement struggles to achieve any notable success. The explanation, it appears, is that among the sophisticated, briefcase-wielding preachers of today's modern era, there is a glaring lack of that burning passion for the supremacy of Allah's religion, a relentless thirst for the victory of Islam, and a deep-seated longing to devote one's life to the pursuit of Allah's path. Only when there is a monumental shift in the hearts and minds of a significant group of individuals, and when a collective emerges that embodies the revolutionary spirit of Islam, will the possibility of Muslims liberating themselves from the bonds of humiliation become a reality, and the vision of Islam's triumph move beyond a futile aspiration. The purpose of this book is to spark and disseminate this very passion within its readers.

The critique aimed at those briefcase-wielding preachers set off quite a stir, a buzz of passionate conversations and animated discussions. One person, with an air of sarcasm, commented that the author seemed to place the ten-point plan mentioned in "Ghalba-e-Islam" on a pedestal, right alongside the Ten Commandments, as though he himself were occupying the same esteemed position as Prophet Moses. Another person, with a raised eyebrow, argued that the choice of words and the lofty tone of the text were deliberately employed to create an impression, a facade if you will, that all the previous efforts made towards the promotion of Islam in this country were woefully

misguided, and now, as if by divine intervention, the mantle of the rejuvenator for a new era had been bestowed upon the author.

A well-known author of several books, with a wry smile, quipped, "Well, it seems our dear Mr. Shaz has also joined the ranks of authors, for better or worse." Another person, with a knowing smirk, suggested that instead of calling him the "author of the book," it would be more fitting, more poetic perhaps, to refer to him as "one of the people of the Book." In the secular circles of the university, swirling with intellectual curiosity and a healthy dose of skepticism, the publication of this book was perceived as if a new, restless, radical leadership was chomping at the bit, eager to emerge and take center stage.

One day, I found myself in the English department, lost in the labyrinth of my Ph.D. thesis, trying to make sense of the chaos. As if out of nowhere, Shamsi appeared, with a copy of "Ghalba-e-Islam" clutched in his hands. The margins were filled with his scribbled thoughts and critiques. He immediately launched into a passionate monologue: "What's the point of all this? The whole idea of conquest seems flawed to me. Why do we need it? Can't we be Muslims without the conquest? Why not make Hudaibiyah our guiding light? To me, the path to true victory runs straight through Hudaibiyah."

I responded, equally fervent, that all of our efforts were indeed aimed at reaching Hudaibiyah. It had to be established as the ultimate goal of our revolutionary movement. Those who saw it merely as a symbol of pacifism were sorely mistaken.

Shamsi went on, his voice still charged with emotion: "In my opinion, the concept of an Islamic state or Caliphate is just an unnecessary addition to Islam." At the time, he was deeply influenced by the writings of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan. He would passionately inform people of the hermeneutical errors with such conviction, as if Khan's critique of Maudoodi was the ultimate truth, and that on the day of Judgement, God would rebuke those who had taken these things as religion when He had never commanded them. Shamsi argued that the

only way to achieve peace in the world was by unconditionally accepting the status quo.

I countered, my voice rising to match his: "Prophets are sent to challenge the status quo. The Prophet's (PBUH) mission was explicitly stated as lifting the burdens and breaking the chains placed upon the people. Whether prophets or their followers, if they bow down to the oppressive system, who will stand up and fight for justice for all nations?"

However, placing the state at the center and core of religion may not be the most fitting approach.

I responded, "Don't make it the focal point, but also don't let it vanish from the edges. Allow everything to occupy its rightful place. If you claim that the Caliphate is a later development, my dear, keep in mind that the term 'Caliphate' simply refers to the system established by the first generation of Muslims after the Prophet's (PBUH) passing, in order to preserve the unity of the Ummah. Abu Bakr (RA) justified his rule as the successor of the Prophet (PBUH). Umar (RA) called himself the successor of the successor of the Prophet (PBUH). Essentially, the unity of the Ummah was maintained by keeping the Prophet (PBUH) at the heart of the matter, and obedience to the leader of the believers became necessary as the successor of the Prophet (PBUH).

There were instances when the Caliph was appointed in the assembly of Saqifah, other times through consultation, and sometimes a committee of prominent Companions (RA) would attempt to resolve the matter through mutual consultation. The key is to understand that any method of maintaining the unity of the Ummah around a prophetic center can be embraced. Call it the Caliphate, Imamate, or any other name within the framework of 'their affairs being determined by consultation among themselves' (أمرهم شورى بينهم). It is irrefutable that during the Prophet's (PBUH) life, and the first generation of Muslims after his passing, they wholeheartedly committed themselves to not only becoming part of a collective

system, but also using their collective and national strength to establish justice and fairness across the globe."

Our lively conversation with Shamsi meandered like a vibrant river when, quite unexpectedly, revered Ahmed Surati drifted into the room like a whimsical butterfly. Although he had bid farewell to the university, Surati couldn't resist the magnetic pull of the library, honoring us with his occasional visits. "Ah!" he burst out, his voice filled with delight, "I had the impression that a class was taking place here, but upon hearing Shaz's voice, I realized the truth. Any gathering enriched by Shaz's presence transcends the mundane, much like Set Theory nestled within the enigmatic realm of Mathematics, wouldn't you agree?"

"But Shamsi is engulfed by the gnawing uncertainty of the future, questioning whether we'll be able to hold onto our identity in this country or not," I said, seizing the opportunity presented by Surati sahib's arrival to divert the conversation toward him.

He spoke up, "Indeed, that's a profoundly crucial and delicate question, one you all should absolutely ponder over. We are up against adversaries who are masters of deception and intrigue. Battling their schemes demands a kind of prophetic insight, a vision that transcends their cunning. When it's said 'And they plan, and Allah plans, and Allah is the best of planners' (Qur'an 8:30), people often interpret it as though God engages in scheming like humans do. But the truth is, the essence of God's stratagems is entirely distinct. Think of the divine tactics that stand against the conspiracies of disbelievers, like Moses' staff defying the sorcery of Samiri. It is our responsibility to confront the Samiri of our time on a prophetic plane, rather than relying on the conventional weapons wielded by ordinary magicians."

"Are you implying that facing Hindu extremism with Muslim extremism isn't the answer?" Shamsi ventured, hoping to explore another facet of the dialogue.

Surati sahib responded, "You've grasped the crux of it. In the past, we've borne the brunt of the clash between Hindu and Muslim extremism. Our country was torn apart, and our collective strength splintered. Now, we're witnessing the groundwork for a Muslim extremist war laid on the same volatile foundation—a far cry from a healthy or sustainable approach. If we continue down this path, defeat is all but inevitable."

"I concur that your perspective is well-founded, although further nuance and polishing is needed," he said, gesturing towards me.

"Yet, at present, the entire Muslim community appears to have reached a consensus: to retaliate against aggression with equal force. Even the Jamaat-e-Islami, historically proponents of an Islamic ideal, have joined the fray in this extremist struggle on behalf of Muslims," Shamsi shared his apprehensions.

Surati Sahib spoke with a hint of melancholy, "Once upon a time, fleeting though it was, Jamaat-e-Islami's call radiated with the elegance of a prophetic touch. Delve into Maulana Maududi's early writings, and you'll find his thoughts were lucid on this matter: on the Day of Judgment, God will not base His decisions on names like Abdullah or Ram Prasad. The basis for His judgment will be good deeds, not merely verbal affirmations. He illustrated this notion with a graceful simplicity in his sermons, asserting that both in this world and the afterlife, God's mercy is solely reserved for those who recognize and obey Him. Those who lack these qualities, regardless of names like Abdul Rahman or Deen Dayal, hold no distinction in God's eyes, and they have no entitlement to His mercy. Alas, as time went on, this prophetic grace couldn't endure. And now, Jamaat-e-Islami, like other factions within the Muslim community, places great emphasis on communitarian, ethnic, and cultural identity, rather than the purity of faith and practice they once championed."

Shamsi then sought to emphasize the distinctive status of the chosen community, "In these current circumstances, we should persist in refining our prophetic essence so that our fellow citizens realize that

we are the custodians of the final message, without which the journey forward in history would become void of meaning."

"Absolutely! If the people of this country truly comprehend who we are and what our role is in the divine blueprint for the future, it would not be surprising if those who regard the worship of stones and trees as essential might opt to revere and respect us, rather than opposing us. If they were to understand that we are the chosen community, that blessings grace this land because of our presence, that in our absence, the rain would cease, the earth would stop bestowing its gifts, and the sun would withhold its radiant light," I suggested a potential strategy.

Surti Sahib cautioned, "Embracing the idea of being a chosen community can be a deceptive snare, a labyrinthine entanglement where one might unwittingly become the prey. In this nation, the realms of Sufis and Syeds have elevated their own sanctity and adoration. They distributed blessings, people sought their guidance, and beheld visions. Yet, what emerged from it all? The Brahmins, too, engage in similar endeavors within their own framework. Our true purpose lies in spreading the message of godliness, of Rabbani, to the masses. The Prophet advised us to become embodiments of Rabbani. In contrast, those lacking a genuine comprehension of the prophetic mission often distort this calling into a plea for self-glorification and honor, making it the crux of their instructions and counsel. To perceive oneself as part of the chosen community is one aspect, but actualizing that exalted status is an entirely different challenge."

Shamsi, feeling perplexed, expressed, "I'm not quite grasping it! The conversation seems to have become tangled."

Surti Sahib unraveled the matter, "Our identity as the chosen community is rooted in the prophetic mission bestowed upon us as the Prophet's deputies and inheritors. If we stray from this mission, we forfeit this esteemed title. The Children of Israel found themselves in a similar predicament, convinced they were God's chosen ones and granted supremacy over all other nations. Yet, their worth stemmed from their guardianship of the Torah; when they neglected its

teachings and their leadership roles, they lost their privileged status. Their delusions of grandeur couldn't shield them from the nightmare of Nazi Germany's concentration camps, leaving them to question why God had forsaken His chosen people in such a dire state."

Shamsi pondered, "So, it appears that this feeling of chosenness can create a kind of delusion of grandeur."

Surti Sahib went on, "Indeed! When a nation falls prey to a misguided sense of chosenness, it not only self-destructs but also wreaks havoc on others. Consider Nazi Germany as an example. The long-standing delusion of grandeur among the Children of Israel contributed to their undoing, as they failed to interpret the signs of impending doom. Conversely, those determined to erase them from existence also harbored a belief in their own divinely ordained mission."

Shamsi, with astonishment in his voice, asked, "Are you suggesting that Hitler was somehow religious?"

Surti Sahib pondered for a moment before replying, "You see, it's not a prerequisite for one to be religious in order to succumb to delusions of grandeur. Just as the Children of Israel had drifted away from their religious roots, so too did Hitler subscribe to his own set of beliefs. He was convinced that the German nation had been created superior by divine providence and that they were destined for domination. Intriguingly enough, this line of thinking can be traced all the way back to the very foundations of Martin Luther's Reformation."

Shamsi couldn't help but exclaim, "Really?!"

Surti Sahib nodded and continued, "It's true. This aspect has been somewhat overlooked in the grand scheme of things, and the study of Nazi Germany's emergence in this context remains incomplete. Historians have noted that in 1871, as the Prussian (German) army returned to Berlin after their victory over the French, they hoisted a banner that read: 'Welch eine Wendung durch Gottes Fugung' (which translates to 'What a turn of events by divine intervention').

Protestant scholars of that era were wont to remind their listeners that God had chosen the German nation to bring low the impious French. The spiritual descendants of Martin Luther, then, found themselves tasked with the humbling of those who had replaced divine guidance with human reason, who had wrenched away the rights of rulership from monarchs and redistributed them among commoners, who had championed the Enlightenment movement born from the loins of secularism—this very movement that had sparked the French Revolution and left the very notion of the Church's rule in tatters. In light of all this, if the German nation truly was divinely appointed to mete out punishment upon these transgressors, what greater fortune could they have possibly imagined?"

It seems that during that era, Germany and France were ideologically divided into two different camps, asked Shamsi.

Shamsi, you're right that during that era, Germany and France were ideologically divided into two different camps. Examining the social landscape of that time reveals a fascinating picture. On every significant occasion, whether it was the German nation's victory over Napoleon in 1813, the war of 1870, or the days of the First World War, Protestant scholars' speeches made it seem as though the German nation was on a divine mission. They believed that Napoleon was a sort of Antichrist, and that God had chosen the German nation to bring about his downfall. In this era, extraordinary activities can be observed among the Protestant Christians. Spiritual centers were being established everywhere, centers for helping the disabled and orphans were coming into existence, missionary activities were accelerating, and it seemed as if the time for the second coming of Christ was near, as if only a few moments remained for the establishment of the divine kingdom.

"However, it is not understandable why racial and aggressive racism emerged from the womb of a purely religious movement," Shamsi inquired with precision.

Surti Sahib responded: The matter is quite clear. Religion was only being used in name here; in reality, the call for racial superiority was being given. Luther held a status more of a national hero than a religious reformer. He presented himself as the savior of the German nation, and not only was there a lack of prophetic tone in his call, but there was also a storm of hatred and enmity in his heart for the Jewish people.

Shamsi mused, "Bizarre, isn't it? The darker aspects of Luther's persona rarely come up for discussion. He's usually seen as some kind of forward-thinking reformer. You'll even catch secular Muslims, every now and then, wishing for an Islamic Luther," as I shared my thoughts.

Surti Sahib retorted, "Ah, those are nothing but naive musings. I'm of the mind that if Luther never was, perhaps there'd be no Hitler either."

"But how does that make sense?" I wondered aloud. "Luther is a religious reformer, holding immense significance within the Protestant Church, while Hitler is pretty much the poster child for evil."

Surti Sahib replied, "Well, even with about four centuries between these two figures, they share a common thread as champions of aggressive nationalism. Neither of them wanted the Jewish people to have the right to live. The distinction is that Luther cloaked his sentiments in religious language, while Hitler harnessed secular rhetoric, like Social Darwinism, to justify German racial superiority. Ultimately, they both sought the same endgame: to strip the Jewish people of their right to live with a religious identity."

Shamsi then remarked, "It's quite the conundrum, isn't it? While Hitler is universally scorned, Luther continues to command respect."

Surti Sahib remarked, "That's the curious power of religious sanctity. While the transgressions of ordinary people are effortlessly laid bare, the cunning schemes and manipulations of religious figures continue to

be shrouded in holiness. Anyone who truly examines Luther's treatise 'On the Jews and Their Lies' with unclouded eyes will soon realize that the tactics Luther advocated for dealing with the Jewish people are strikingly akin to those implemented by Hitler, only with a few extra twists and turns."

"Remarkable! It's fascinating how their perspectives align so closely," Shamsi wondered aloud, a sense of amazement in his voice.

Surti Sahib continued with an air of somber reflection, "Luther did not shy away from the dark recommendations of burning Jewish synagogues, laying waste to their homes, confiscating their sacred texts, silencing their rabbis, imposing travel restrictions, eradicating usurious financial practices, and forcing their young men and women into involuntary labor. Hitler, both a student and a master, carried these ideas to new heights, introducing bans on marriages between Jews and Aryans, the creation of separate Jewish settlements known as ghettos, and the sterilization of those considered inferior, including Jews."

He paused, eyes searching for understanding, "Though German Jews viewed themselves as German citizens, both Luther and Hitler saw only the Jew in them, equating Jewishness with being anti-German. It's no surprise that Hitler held Luther in high esteem, describing him in Mein Kampf as one of the world's greatest heroes."

Surti Sahib's voice grew quiet, "After the fall of Hitler, when trials unfolded against his followers, some of the leaders proclaimed that if Martin Luther were alive, he'd be standing shoulder to shoulder with them in the courtroom. They believed Luther saw Jews as a venomous brood, deserving of fire and extermination. And so, many of Hitler's supporters considered him a reincarnation of Martin Luther, a sign of the deeply intertwined roots of German nationalism and anti-Semitic sentiment. In that sense, Hitler and Luther were two sides of the same dark coin."

Surti Sahib articulated, "I wouldn't label it secular, but rather, dangerously deceptive. With absolute power comes an array of pitfalls. There's a term in psychology called 'hubris,' which goes beyond narcissism. When a leader becomes so profoundly disconnected from reality, they feel as if everything they do—even without the endorsement of the masses—is supported by the entire cosmos. The accumulation of power convinces them they're on a divine mission, when in truth, it's rooted in a personality disorder. The charismatic figures we admire often harbor a complex web of delusions and convictions within their hearts and minds. The veil of normalcy has yet to be removed from them." Surti Sahib's words flowed like a river before he rose to his feet, as if the intensity of his thoughts demanded movement.

Indeed, Surati Sahib might be onto something. The concept of being a chosen nation is both delicate and sensitive. It's not uncommon to unwittingly slip from a prophetic stance into a struggle for national pride. The Babri Masjid leaders exemplify this, but they're far from alone - many great conflicts and wars throughout history have been waged under the guise of establishing peace and delivering justice. American imperialism, for instance, justifies its expansionist tendencies by invoking human rights and individual freedom. Even the dominance of the US dollar is grounded in a similar sense of sanctity, as evidenced by the inscription: "In God We Trust."

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The Unbearable Heaviness of Slavery

In a nation beset by unrelenting turmoil and chaos, the prospect of engaging in scholarly research and academic endeavors seemed an unattainable luxury. Yet, despite the odds, my esteemed professor, Jafar Zaki Sahib Rizvi, was adamant that I devote myself entirely to the preparation of my doctoral thesis. To facilitate this, he even took a year's leave from the university with a singular focus on this pursuit. Tragically, as he began reviewing the opening pages of my initial chapter in his supervisory capacity, a severe angina attack struck him. A few days later, once he had convalesced, I couldn't bear to impose the burden of academic work on my revered professor. Yielding to my entreaties, he agreed to let Naqvi Sahib take over the editing and formatting of the manuscript in his place.

The arrangement dictated that I would write ten to twelve pages daily, adhering to a predetermined plan, and present them to Naqvi Sahib the following morning. Typing was a cumbersome task for me, as I habitually typed with just one finger. After enduring ten to twelve days of this process, my fingers inevitably began to ache.

As if in response to some divine intervention, it was during this period that a young man from West Bengal arrived in Aligarh with his newlywed bride in tow. The couple's marriage had ignited a social dispute, compelling them to flee their homeland to escape the ensuing unrest. The young man sought a suitable office job, and through the recommendation of my respected cousin, Javed Zulqarnain Sahib, he found his way to me. His name was Sharif, a remarkably capable individual with invaluable experience in English typing. It seemed as if providence had sent him specifically to aid me in my endeavors. Each afternoon, Sharif Bhai would arrive, and I would dictate the draft to him. He would then skillfully type the pages and hand them back to me. In this manner, the first draft of the manuscript was completed within an astonishingly brief span of five to six months.

One day, as I worked on the manuscript corrections alongside Sharif Bhai, my friend Abdul Qadir appeared. He hailed from Somalia and had relinquished his plan to return home due to the raging civil war in Mogadishu. Though his life was fraught with challenges, his face always carried a smile—but on that day, he seemed particularly perturbed.

"Brother," he began, "the devil is cunning, and if we don't act now, he will succeed. At first, I didn't comprehend the situation. I told him to let the devil have his way while we focus on doing God's work. He replied, "This is no laughing matter. You know Usman, a devout and God-fearing man. Love and affection have blossomed between him and Aminah. If we don't find a solution immediately, the devil may interfere."

I advised him to steer clear of the situation himself. He responded, "I'm searching for a qadi to perform the marriage, and I need your help." I questioned why they couldn't wait a few days for their parents to attend the ceremony. He explained that if word reached their homes, the marriage would be impossible. The girl belonged to the Abghal tribe, and Usman to the Habar Jadir tribe. These tribes were at war during the Somali civil war, so an urgent marriage was the only viable solution.

As I listened to Abdul Qadir's words, I was reminded of my old classmate, Ali Baqir. He was an Iraqi student who had been absent from class for several days. When I finally saw him and inquired about his well-being, he mentioned facing some difficulties but triumphantly declared they had chased the devil away. Confused, I asked how. Grinning, he revealed, "I got married, and now I live without fear."

Abdul Qadir, filled with insistence, couldn't wait to get a Qadi on board. My thoughts wandered, and I figured, why not have a little heart-to-heart with Maulana Taqi Amini Sahab? Maulana, an impressive figure, had this laid-back vibe with us students. As fate had it, the very next day, the sweet sound of wedding bells filled Maulana's

abode, leaving Satan to chew on a big ol' slice of humble pie, once more.

Just a few days later, I found myself at Usman's place, basking in the warmth of a simple Walima celebration, when I stumbled upon the fact that Sharif Bhai was nesting right there in a cozy corner of the same pad. With a contagious eagerness, he led me to his personal sanctuary and introduced me to his better half, Aisha. Between the lines of our casual chit-chat, I discovered Aisha hailed from a freshly converted Dalit Muslim family. This bright gal had dabbled in Anthropology, scoring an MA, but she couldn't help but feel a pang of regret over the hiccup in her scholarly pursuits. Her eyes sparkled with hope as she mused, "Maybe in a few moons, the fire in people's hearts will cool, and the road back to our homeland will clear up for us."

I commented, "You see, Islam isn't just your family's heritage; it's a faith you've embraced by choice. In a way, you're linked to the second generation of Muslims, those historical figures we recognize as the Tabi'in. That's quite an honor, don't you think?" I paused briefly, then inquired, "So, as you journey along this spiritual road, how does the path before you appear?" Aisha's face flickered with emotion, and for an instant, she seemed to be absorbed in her own deep thoughts. Eventually, she shared, "You know, Sharif often recites a verse of poetry for me:

To step into love's testimony, a path to pave,
Folks think it's easy, the life of a Muslim to brave.

I have to say, embracing this life of faith is far from a breeze. Just when we think we've conquered one challenge, surprise! Another one is waiting in the wings. We've been on this quest for our true selves for generations, in search of our inner worth. There was a time when we were entwined with Buddhist beliefs. But then, Allah guided us towards Islam, and now it seems like there's a journey ahead, a new destination to explore. Who knows what the divine plan holds for us?”

Beyond Islam? I inquired, my voice laced with surprise. She replied, "The Islam our ancestors adopted, searching for truth, seems to be scarce even among Muslims these days." What do you mean? I sought an elucidation. She expounded, "There's the abstract Islam, the theoretical, and then there's the tangible, the day-to-day Islam that Muslims practice. Recently, I've been delving into the discourse about the distinctions between the noble (Ashraf) and the common (Ajlaf) classes. It leaves me astounded that even among Muslims, those born in privilege refuse to see the less fortunate as their equals. In Fatawa Razawiya, it's penned that people from humble backgrounds, like weavers, potters, and oil pressers, cannot attain equality with Syeds and Sheikhs, even if they become scholars. I am bewildered, as this is the same Islam where God proclaims, 'Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.' The transformation of Islam, from what it was to what it has become, leaves me in awe."

Scholars' tomes reveal their personal inclinations, I noted. With a nod, she replied, "True, but their views often dominate. They're perceived as faith's torchbearers. Their fatwas hold sway over the masses. The common people see them as divinity's truthful emissaries. Their words are heeded, while Quranic wisdom may be overlooked. Every time a soul is belittled in faith's name, my equilibrium falters. Maybe my sensitivity lies heavy in this matter, but what can I do? I hail from a world where generations seek methods to cleanse their essence, but in the pursuit of nurturing our souls, of grasping our dignity, the truth is we've yet to prevail."

A fog of confusion swirled around me as I attempted to fathom Aisha's unique history. She sighed, "Perhaps Sharif left out a crucial detail. We were once disciples of Buddhism, but my father's embrace of Islam led to my birth into a Muslim family. The knowledge of our ancient past left me awestruck, a testament to the lengths our forebears journeyed to assert their humanity. Yet, it seems the world has yet to grant us the acceptance we seek. They view us as lesser beings, a rung below the rest of humanity."

That first inkling, when did it dawn upon her? I inquired. She recounted, "I took my first breath in Mumbra, our family's new abode after my father's embrace of Islam. I must have been a mere four or five years old, navigating unfamiliar streets and new faces. My father, driven by ambition, opened a quaint shop selling ready-made garments. My education began at an Urdu-medium school, which could aptly be described as an informal madrasa, a place where neighborhood girls and I shared learning experiences.

For a considerable time, I wandered unaware of my roots, oblivious to my origins. Then, one fateful day, we received news of an elder's passing in our family, a key to unlocking my heritage. Our ancestry traced back to a charming village near Pune, and as the initial chaos subsided and I mingled with my newfound kin, the truth unfolded: we belonged to the Mahar caste, our forebears having adopted Buddhism in the wake of Babasaheb Ambedkar's movement.

However, the tendrils of our past still clung to the present. Those remaining in the village staunchly practiced their ancient Buddhist beliefs, determined to showcase their severance from Hinduism. Yet, their cultural and social identity remained entangled, unable to fully disentangle from Hindu traditions. Even the vibrant Hindu festivals of Holi and Diwali refused to relinquish their grip on us, a poignant reminder of the complexities and subtleties life invariably present

Even after embracing Buddhism, Holi and Diwali still lingered? I couldn't help but express my astonishment.

She nodded, "Yes, old habits are hard to shake off. You see, when Babasaheb announced the conversion of two million Dalits to Buddhism in Nagpur back in 1956, he made certain to extract a solemn vow from his followers. They pledged to completely forsake Hinduism, to never worship the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh, to never regard Ram and Krishna as divine avatars, and to abstain from idolizing Gauri Ganpati and other Hindu deities. There were 22 points in total that he required his followers to commit to."

"Then how did these Hindu festivals find their way back in?" I inquired.

Even after adopting Buddhism, they still celebrated Holi and Diwali? I expressed my astonishment. She replied, "Yes! Old habits die hard. Although Babasaheb, along with two million Dalits, renounced Hinduism in 1956 in Nagpur, he specifically made a pact with his fellow converts to completely reject Hinduism, never worship Brahman, Vishnu or Mahesh, never accept Ram and Krishna as avatars of God, and never worship Gauri, Ganpati or other Hindu deities. Yet, despite the 22 points in this pact, Hindu festivals persisted."

"Then how did these Hindu festivals come back?" I asked.

Call it a legal quirk or psychological interpretation, most Dalits participate in these festivals with the notion that their children don't believe in the customs. Some claim that they don't celebrate the festivals for religious reasons, but partake in the festivities for their children's happiness. "The situation for Dalits today would have been different if Babasaheb had lived longer after the conversion," she mused.

"Would they have embraced another faith?" I wondered.

"It's hard to say. But one thing is for sure: the edifice of Brahmanism would have collapsed."

"How so?" I probed.

She reflected, "You see, Babasaheb lived just under two months after converting. He staged a gathering in Nagpur on October 14th, and a similar large event was scheduled in Mumbai for December 16th, with more cities to follow. These efforts were poised to topple the structure of Brahmanism, but fate intervened, and Babasaheb suddenly passed away on December 6th."

Suddenly? This must hint at some deep conspiracy, I blurted out involuntarily. Say: Only Allah knows the truth. However, it's puzzling how a genuinely good man, whose revolutionary actions stirred excitement among high-caste Hindus, could have quietly met death while asleep. Allah knows best! Anyway, let's leave these matters aside. This is a subject for investigation. For me, it's enough to be related to the same Mahar caste that produced a son like Baba Saheb. When I first visited the village, I became aware of my identity. Interestingly, even now, our entry was restricted in areas where high-caste Hindus resided. Members of our community still lived outside the village boundaries in a place referred to as Maharwara, meaning the area where the lower-caste Mahars reside.

Upon returning from the village, I felt a strong desire to explore my roots. I delved into the history of the Mahar people. Ambedkar's political struggle and his revolutionary writings left a deep impression on me. At first, I couldn't comprehend why he chose Buddhism over Islam. Now, after years of research, it seems to me that Ambedkar, like myself, must have grappled with the question of which Muslim category he would belong to after accepting Islam. He couldn't become a Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, or Pathan, as these required a connection to a specific racial lineage. Now, if joining the Ansari and Mansoori brotherhoods meant remaining at the lower rung of society even after embracing Islam, what was the value of such an Islam?

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But what did they truly gain from Buddhism? I questioned, my mind seeking more. Aisha, with a thoughtful expression, shared her perspective: Buddhism was not their final destination, but rather a station on their journey. From the very beginning, Baba Saheb had resolved that, to break free from the suffocating grip of the caste system and reclaim their humanity, they must bid farewell to Hinduism. Islam could have been a viable alternative. They held Muslims in good regard, but they were also acutely aware of an insidious Brahminism lurking within Indian Muslim society. Just as Brahmins' seventy sins are pardoned, an excessive reverence for Sayyids exists here too. Muslims are splintered into Ashraf and Ajlaf households, their lives dictated by an invisible divide.

To liberate a people, oppressed for centuries under the yoke of one social system, only to shackle them with the chains of another, would hardly be a wise or enlightened move. Ambedkar's ultimate mission was to dismantle the caste system, be it among Hindus or Muslims. Buddhism, in this grand odyssey, was merely a temporary respite, a place to pause and catch their breath before continuing the struggle.

Then, what do you have to say about the Poona Pact, which is commonly thought to have made it more challenging for Ambedkar to

leave Hinduism behind? She mused: The Poona Pact, you see, didn't quite have anything of that sort. You might be mixing it up with the 1936 Ambedkar-Moonje Pact. The Poona Pact of 1923 merely stated that Baba Saheb would give up demanding a separate national identity and distinct elections for the Dalits. In return, they'd be granted reserved seats in provincial assemblies and an 18% slice of the seats in the central assembly. However, in the August 1936 agreement, it was made abundantly clear that Dalits who embraced Islam or Christianity would not be entitled to reservation benefits. From this perspective, you could argue that reservations became a formidable hurdle in their path to accepting Islam. The pressure from the upper-caste Hindus was so unrelenting that Ambedkar found himself cornered into making a temporary decision. What else could he have done? On one side, the Hindus laid out an extensive menu of reservations and government incentives; on the other, a version of Islam tainted by Brahmin influence was unwilling to welcome them with open arms, full human dignity, and the status of upper-caste Muslims.

"But, in theory, Islam doesn't harbor any room for caste-based discrimination. It's a societal blemish that Muslims have picked up through their interactions with Hindus."

She said, her voice filled with a spark of indignation: "Which Islam are you talking about? The one where the entire Muslim society is divided by caste? Where Sayyids take pride in their supposed lineage, and when Indian scholars from various sects—whether they're Deobandi like Ashraf Ali Thanvi or Barelvi like Ahmed Raza Khan—agree that lower-caste Muslims can't be equal to Sayyids? Have you read Bahishti Zewar? It even outlines who Sayyids should associate with, and lower-caste Muslims are considered off-limits for socializing."

She paused, allowing the weight of her words to sink in, then continued: "Now, tell me, for those who set out in search of human dignity, who long to be treated with the respect they deserve as human beings, what allure could there be in this casteist social system that pervades Indian Muslim communities?"

Aisha's fervent discourse carried on, her words fueled by passion and conviction. In the midst of the conversation, Sharif Bhai arrived, bearing cups of steaming tea. He remarked, "It seems the discussion has touched upon Bahishti Zewar." "Indeed," he continued, "Aisha has quite the bone to pick with our religious leaders."

With a heavy sigh, Sharif Bhai recounted their tale, "These clerics have brought us so much anguish. Back in Kolkata, we were neighbors, our lives inextricably linked. A few years ago, Aisha's father, a respected principal, forged a friendship with my own. We frequented each other's homes, a sense of camaraderie uniting our families. My father held Aisha in high esteem, and one day he announced his desire to welcome her as his daughter-in-law. She was devout, intelligent, and accomplished. Where would you find such a girl in today's world?

"However, the issue was our Sayyid lineage, while Aisha's family had converted to Islam from a Dalit background. My mother begrudgingly agreed, yet our relatives were incensed. 'How dare you bring a Dalit girl into a Sayyid family?' The situation escalated into an ugly conflict. My father, his beliefs rooted in a religious organization, saw the marriage as an act of virtue and persisted. However, we paid a steep price.

"On the wedding day, our relatives wreaked havoc, chaos descending upon our home. The police intervened, but the situation only deteriorated. We were forced to flee the city that very night. I've heard things have calmed since then, but the migration was inevitable.

"Consider the immense cost of adhering to one of the core principles of Islam in our Muslim society. If I can barely shoulder my own sorrow, just imagine the burden Aisha must bear. Her tormentors, it seems, have reserved their place in hell for countless lifetimes."

"Alright, let's assume you've reached a certain social status," I said. Aisha's eyes flashed with defiance, "What kind of accomplishment is that? It's exactly the social hierarchy that I've been battling against. When every human is equal, the sole true measure of human dignity

lies in piety. So, why on earth should becoming a Sayyid's wife be considered an achievement?" Aisha pressed on, "Yes, you could say that from a social perspective, I am now in a position where I can more effectively wage the war for human dignity. I can confront the entrenched prejudices within Muslim society."

Aisha's voice took on a nostalgic tone as she reminisced about her college days, sharing the story of her Brahmin friend. "During my first year of my MA, we were inseparable. We spent most of our waking hours together, and my being Muslim never hindered our friendship. However, the day she learned I was from a Dalit background, it was like a dark storm cloud had cast a shadow over her. Our once warm and enthusiastic friendship turned cold. One day, she even whispered a complaint to me, accusing me of 'corrupting' her religion by eating and drinking with her. Our friendship soured into animosity, and the situation worsened when she began taunting me about my caste. She would make cutting remarks in the company of our friends. 'Ugh, the college restroom is so disgusting these days,' she would sneer, fully aware that I could hear her. I would listen to her barbs and force a smile, trying to hide the pain they caused."

"So, it seems that upper-caste Hindus still haven't truly accepted Dalits in public spaces," I asked. Aisha replied, "Not at all, it's more like they've learned to tolerate them. Perhaps because if they don't, the lower-caste Hindus might convert to another religion, and the artificial majority of the upper-caste Hindus would vanish."

I asked her about those who were still left behind, "What do you think about the people who are still Dalits, adhering to their old religion? What could be the path to salvation for them?"

Aisha responded, "Salvation is a heavy word. How can people whose humanity is constantly doubted, who are considered lesser beings, even think about salvation, heaven, or hell? For centuries, they've been living in their own hell, where generations have been assigned the task of cleaning up human filth. Every society has people who clean, but no nation in the world has made such a fuss over it that a large population

has been designated to clean up the waste of their fellow human beings, and moreover, it's presented as a religious duty. The steps Dr. Ambedkar took for social change have indeed created a revolutionary spirit among the Dalit community. Now, there's a generation of educated and aware Dalit youth entering the field, but the societal pressure is so intense that it's not easy for them to pave their way. Dalits have knocked on many doors, but they've never been accepted as equal human beings anywhere."

"You frequently mention the importance of being considered a 'whole human' or prioritizing the attainment of human dignity above all else. Could it be that this emphasis is born out of the intensity of emotion, given that Muslims are also grappling with their fair share of oppression and injustice?" I inquired.

Aisha thoughtfully replied, "The anguish of Dalit Muslims is double-edged. Muslims are already in a challenging situation, but even after converting to another faith, we fail to escape that level of adversity. Our social status refuses to change even after embracing Islam. We are perceived as Dalit Muslims, regardless of our accomplishments. Even with extensive education, we are pigeonholed as Pasi, Dhunia, and Bhangi, despite our professions having no correlation with these labels. Take Dr. Noor Alam in Kolkata, for example, a highly skilled and respected professor. Once his Pamaria caste was revealed, he found himself in a constant state of conflict with the Sheikh and Syed communities."

"Pamaria?" I pondered aloud, "Maybe this term is used for the Pasi caste in Bihar."

Many years later, when K.R. Narayanan became the President of the Republic, I found myself at the Press Club of India, sitting among a group of non-Muslim journalists. Most of those present were from the upper caste. A gentleman, holding a newspaper, pointed to a picture of K.R. Narayanan and remarked, "Did you know when Narayanan got the chance to hoist the flag for the first time at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, his expression was priceless. Just look at the picture; you can

almost hear him thinking, 'I wish I could climb the flagpole.'" The room erupted in laughter at the quip. Later, I discovered that he was from the Pasi caste, also known as Parwa, a fact that cast a shadow over the seemingly innocent joke, revealing the deep-rooted prejudices still present in society.

In that case, what do you believe is the solution to this issue? I attempted to comprehend Aisha's objections. She spoke: Until Brahminism is entirely vanquished in this nation, the battle for human dignity and human rights cannot be victorious.

"But even after becoming a Muslim, you claim we remain unchanged," I mentioned.

She responded, "Brahminism has its talons in every corner. No faith in India is immune to its grasp. Those who became Christians in pursuit of their souls are compelled to live as Dalit Christians. In some regions, there are even separate churches for Dalits. Similarly, those who adopted Sikhism are labeled as Mazhabi Sikhs and are considered inferior as well. The reality is that if Dalits uncover a path to regain their dignity, they will flock to it in great numbers."

"Could there be a better alternative than Islam? We need to create an effective strategy regarding this," Sharif Bhai proposed. He added, "Professor Noor Alam states that the notion of equality among Muslims lasts merely for five minutes – as long as they are engaged in prayer. High and low caste people stand together during prayer, but as soon as they step outside of the mosque, the distinctions of lineage and social status resume their roles."

"Allow me to say that I have no qualms in asserting that the future of Dalits, Adivasis, and other subjugated people in this nation is intertwined with Islam, but with the Islam that arrived on Malabar's shores during the first century Hijri. That generation of Muslim merchants and preachers regarded the local populace as fellow human beings, invited them to Islam, and then, without heeding race or color, forged familial bonds with them. As for today's generation of Muslims

and their religious leaders, the majority are victims of a form of Brahminism. Until Islam is cleansed of these corruptions, its gates cannot open for the oppressed masses."

Aisha's words held a raw agony, woven with the fibers of her profound explorations, observations, and personal encounters. I yearned to keep absorbing her revelations about the struggles faced by the Dalits, as if her voice was a balm for wounds long ignored. But the night had grown late, and it was time for me to take my leave from Sharif Bhai. As I journeyed homeward, a verse from Iqbal echoed within me, filling the spaces between heartbeats and thoughts, its cadence a haunting reminder of the truths shared in our conversation:

Within the shadows of the night, India's enslaved know not the dawn,
In this very soil, the sun's passage remains withdrawn.[xxxv]

Aisha, though born a Muslim, was raised in a Dalit-Muslim family. The greatness of Dr. Ambedkar was etched in her heart because of his fight for a new beginning. I contemplated the power of a single individual who breaks chains and initiates a new world. On Ambedkar Jayanti, I remembered a folk song sung to the rhythm of the dhol:

"Our father's written words demand our rights,
Dissolve the burdens of slavery, in our fight.
No more lies, we seek true consent,
Our ally and friend, we desire to ascent."[xxxvi]

As the folk song played, I couldn't help but feel the subtle sting of satire aimed at us, the Indian Muslims. There's something extraordinary about Ambedkar, who emerged as a beacon of hope for millions burdened by oppression and strife. Yet, those who should have been the champions of the downtrodden, in their misguided wisdom, chose to slam shut the very doors of dignity for their fellow beings.

By casting aside the Quranic principle of all men being equal, they ventured down a path of division and segregation, arguing for

compatibility and incompatibility based on social standing, cultural affinities, and anthropological divisions. And in doing so, they further fragmented the human spirit and created chasms within the very fabric of our society.

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A World Without Bhim

Today, I found myself reflecting on a conversation I had with a Brahmin neighbor from my childhood. I must have been around ten or twelve years old at the time. It was a chilly winter day, and Amiri Lal sat in the sun, perusing the newspaper. Somehow, the discussion turned to the topic of higher and lower castes. He argued, "God created some people as superior and others as inferior; this is His divine order. Don't you see that purebred cows yield up to twenty-two liters of milk, while ordinary cows provide only three to four liters? Lineage matters, doesn't it? God formed some people from His head and others from His feet. Now, if those born from His feet, the laborers, were to engage in intellectual pursuits, everything would become chaotic."

I listened to his words, astonished. He continued, "Consider this: if I were to place my foot where my head should be, or cut off my nose and attach it where my eye should be, would I be functional? The caste system, in which humans are born, is similar. Everyone should perform the tasks for which they were created. The scriptures dictate this. Those who view all humans as equals or reject the concept of untouchability are disrespecting the scriptures."

In response to my objection that Allah created every human being with the same nature, so how could anyone be considered untouchable or deserving of contempt? He countered, "Untouchability pertains to the body, not the soul. Those who consume inappropriate foods and pollute their bodies with meat and fish cannot be considered pure. However, if these individuals remain content in their caste and happily fulfill their roles, they may have the opportunity to be born into a higher caste in their next life."

"And is there no hope of liberation for them in this life?" I asked innocently.

He replied, "Why do they need liberation? This very thought is mistaken. All four castes together create a single body. When your foot is injured, who cries out in pain first? The mouth, isn't it? Look! The Shudra (foot) was hurt, but the scream came from the mouth (Brahmin). And who hurried to soothe the injured foot? It was these hands (Kshatriya) that gently took care of it. This is the system that sustains society. If the Shudra aspires to sit in a chair or execute priestly duties, it would amount to disrupting the divine order. The Manusmriti explicitly states that a Shudra must sit on the ground in the presence of a Brahmin, and those who refuse should be admonished with a stick. The teachings of the sacred texts are the ultimate truth, and we must not impose our own intellect upon them. Humans adhere to scriptures, while animals follow their instincts."

That day, Ameeri Lal's words left me astounded. At the time, I was not fully aware of how the caste-based Manuvaadi system had oppressed millions of people from the so-called lower castes in this country for centuries, depriving them of their basic human dignity. I remembered my childhood village, where the settlements of lower-caste Hindus were situated on the outskirts. The cowherds, fishermen, sweepers, leatherworkers, and others like them, who were always available to serve us day and night, addressed us with the titles of "master" and "mistress." Our beloved Mangla lovingly watered the flower beds and picked red and yellow roses for us. These people supported us during times of happiness and sorrow, their presence adding color and life to our homes during the mango season and festive occasions. Yet, it never occurred to me to visit their homes. The feudal and class-based society had established a dividing line between the so-called nobles and the commoners within the framework that Islam had created. This division was prevalent in religious households, where Sufi saints and Deobandi and Barelvi scholars were regarded as the standard-bearers of orthodoxy.

It was only a few days ago when I happened to walk past the library canteen and heard Sharif Bhai's voice calling me over. He was sitting with a distinguished-looking man, who seemed like a wise sage,

enjoying their dosas under the shade of trees where iron chairs were placed. After our introductions, I was amazed to find out that the man was indeed named Sheikh-ul-Islam. Tall and slim, with a long white-tinged beard and deep-set eyes peering through his spectacles, he exuded an aura of wisdom.

I learned that he was Sharif Bhai's relative and had stopped on his way to Delhi to visit his daughter. He was delighted to know about our mutual traditions, and the formal demeanor he had maintained thus far seemed to dissolve. Perhaps he sensed my curiosity regarding his name. With great warmth, he said, "There's an interesting story behind my becoming Sheikh-ul-Islam. About thirty years ago, when I decided to embrace Islam, I thought of adopting the name Islam. Many Muslims in the area of Bombay where I lived at the time had 'Sheikh' as the last part of their names. So, I chose the name Islam Sheikh. However, when I went to the big mosque to recite the Kalma, I had an in-depth conversation with the Imam. He was very pleased with my knowledge and suggested that I should not be Islam Sheikh, but rather Sheikh-ul-Islam, and serve the religion of Allah."

He filled out the name change form himself and wrote Sheikh-ul-Islam. Since then, a lot of water has passed under the bridge. To this day, I feel like my name demands something from me. As he said this, Sheikh-ul-Islam became lost in deep thought. The scene of my conversation with Aisha a few days earlier re-emerged in my mind. I thought to myself that Sheikh-ul-Islam didn't seem like a Muslim from a so-called lower caste. His personality carried such an aura of power, his face with the same masculine grace, and the perfect blend of majesty and beauty found on the faces of the Men of Allah.

When he discovered that Aisha and I had been delving into a variety of topics, he began to express that Aisha is a girl born into a new era, a sensitive soul. She immerses herself in the study of Anthropology, perhaps grasping the subtle nuances of these matters more profoundly than most. "What I've come to understand," he said, "is that in the battle for respect and dignity, the cornerstone lies in how one defines oneself. You see, when we, the Mahars, adopted this notion, it sparked

a revolution within our community. Now, being a Mahar is no longer a source of shame; it has become a badge of honor." Curious, I inquired if Ambedkar was the catalyst for this transformation. He replied thoughtfully, "Ambedkar indeed played an instrumental role, but he wasn't the sole foundation of this intellectual awakening. His true accomplishment lies in unearthing our history and breathing life into this new narrative. Tell me, have you ever heard of the village of Bhima Koregaon?"

"No, I'm not aware of it," I admitted, expressing my lack of knowledge.

He said, "Ambedkar's greatest achievement is that he discovered a crucial aspect of our history. If you ever get a chance, conduct a detailed study of Koregaon village. You'll understand how a nation can become disoriented when its history is lost. Is Koregaon a religious place?" I asked.

He replied, "Not religious, but its significance is no less. This event took place in 1818 when about eight hundred Mahars confronted the twenty-eight thousand strong Brahmin Peshwa army at Koregaon. The Mahars achieved a resounding victory, and the British, to honor the Mahar victors, erected a memorial pillar in Koregaon. While studying in England, Ambedkar discovered this momentous historical victory of his people. Upon returning to India, he identified the location of this memorial pillar, retrieved it, and then designated it as a pilgrimage site for the Mahars. He would visit there every year on the first of January to commemorate this great victory. Thousands and then millions of people began to gather. Soon, the Mahars felt a sense of pride and belonging, as they were part of a brave nation that, despite being few in number, had managed to defeat the high-caste Brahmins."

Ambedkar's efforts in uncovering and celebrating this historical victory helped uplift the spirits of the Mahar community, providing them with a sense of pride and identity that had long been missing.

"Eight hundred against eighteen thousand - it's almost like a miracle," I said, my voice laced with awe.

He replied thoughtfully, "To truly grasp this remarkable victory, you need to consider the psychological and societal forces that propelled it. The history of the Mahars is a fascinating tale. We primarily belong to the Nag tribe. You must have seen those Buddha statues with a serpent casting a protective shadow over them. There was a time when Buddhism was the dominant religion, stretching from India to Afghanistan, and from China to Japan. Buddha established a society rooted in brotherhood and equality, a place where idol worship was not allowed. But, as it often happens in religious history, followers of Buddhism eventually began creating statues of Buddha. When the Brahmanical assault came, they couldn't defend themselves. The statues of Buddha, after a series of modifications, started to resemble Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh. The Brahmins seized control of Buddhist temples, and those who had been the support and sustenance of Buddhism were enslaved. A new interpretation of religion emerged, claiming that some people were destined to be eternal slaves. Their role in life was to clean up after others, dispose of dead animals, live outside settlements like untouchables, and, above all, ensure their shadows would never defile the devout or their sacred rituals."

Yes, it does appear that the struggle between higher and lower castes can be traced back to the clash between Hinduism, as represented by Brahmanism, and Buddhism. Buddhism, with its focus on equality and brotherhood, contrasted sharply with the hierarchical caste system perpetuated by Brahmanism, resulting in widespread discrimination and injustice.

My friend emphasized that we should not refer to it as Hinduism, as this term is more of a geographical label given by the Arabs, rather than a true representation of a religion. The word 'Hindu' is not found in the religious texts of Hindus, such as the Vedas, Puranas, Gita, or Upanishads. It is Brahmanism that, under the guise of religion, has subjected the Mahars and other lower castes to terrible oppression and mistreatment.

The Mahars and other lower castes had to bear the humiliation of having pots hung around their necks and brooms tied to their waists,

branding them as untouchables. This degrading treatment forced some to leave their homes and seek shelter in the jungles. These displaced individuals are the same people now referred to as 'tribals,' who have experienced centuries of suffering and discrimination, a lingering testament to the painful history of caste-based prejudice.

Despite their considerable numbers, how did they accept a life of humiliation and degradation?

He responded, "Although there were occasional uprisings, the torment inflicted upon the lower castes was in the name of religion. They were led to believe that if they embraced this divinely ordained scheme in their present lives, they might be reborn into a higher caste in their next life, living as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, or Vaishyas. This manipulation amounted to a kind of brainwashing, causing a vast population to view themselves as lesser and accept the notion of eternal impurity.

But wasn't the term 'Mleccha' also used to describe Muslims?

He replied, "Indeed, they tried employing this tactic against Muslims, but it failed. As Muslims held political power, it was impossible to ostracize them socially. However, they devised a new, more effective strategy."

Curious, I inquired, "What was that?"

He explained, "While the term 'Mleccha' didn't gain traction, the Brahmins, realizing their inability to play a decisive role in the country based on the census conducted before independence, endeavored to forcefully integrate various lower castes into the Hindu umbrella. In 1932, as you might be aware, this process led Gandhi to undertake a fast unto death. As a secondary measure, they manipulated Muslims through various guises and pretexts, instilling the belief that they were a minority in the country and thus consigning them to live on the fringes indefinitely."

"Then, what do you propose as a way to break free from this mental conditioning?" I inquired.

He responded, "The Dalits are, little by little, liberating themselves from the enchantment of Brahminism. Ambedkar has illuminated a path for them. However, for Muslims, their predicament is somewhat more precarious. When I listen to their esteemed scholars and intellectuals employ the term 'minority' to describe themselves, I feel an urge to lament over their forsaken wisdom. If you incessantly dwell on your frailties, you eventually come to accept them as truths. And once your internal fortitude has been vanquished, external support proves futile."

And what are your thoughts on the prospect of a new revolution in this country through a Dalit-Muslim alliance? He replied, with a wistful gaze: "I see it as a glimmer of hope, a potentially positive outcome. Yet, there's a noticeable lack of readiness within the Muslim community. They haven't quite found the resolve to break bread with the Chamars and Bhangis, to truly stand side by side. They, too, are held captive by the invisible chains of a kind of Brahminism. How can a united front endure when its foundation is so fragile? For far too long, they have been lending their individual strength to the Brahmins and Baniyas of the Congress party. Suspicion plagues their relationship, but still, they remain in the tricksters' camp, unashamed. It's astonishing that so many esteemed scholars and intellectuals have willingly embraced this disheartening reality. In many ways, our Dalit Hindus possess a heightened awareness that eludes them."

He paused, taking a deep breath before continuing: "When I find myself in the company of my non-Muslim relatives, it's as if I can feel the flames of resentment against the upper caste smoldering in their hearts. They are acutely aware of the injustices they've suffered. I recall attending a gathering in Pune last year, where a young man passionately urged Dalits and other lower caste Hindus to distance themselves from the Ram Mandir movement. He warned that it was a cunning trap, a snare designed to entangle them once more. After all, they aren't truly considered Hindus by the very religion that deems

them untouchable, unworthy of setting foot in its temples. Why, then, should they contribute to its perpetuation?"

He sighed, a note of both sadness and determination in his voice: "These voices may be faint whispers in the wind for now, but the new generation of educated Dalits is quietly working away, chipping at the foundations of the status quo. Change is brewing, just beneath the surface."

So, do you think that in the coming days, the political consciousness of the Dalits might bring them closer to the Muslims? He replied, with a thoughtful expression: "At the moment, it doesn't seem like a strong possibility. One obstacle is the legal tangle – the Constitution's Article 341 acts as a barrier to Dalits embracing Islam. Another reason is the psychological impact of Dr. Ambedkar's preference for Buddhism over Islam."

I asked, what could be the reason for an educated man, who maintained good relations with Muslims, to choose Buddhism over Islam? He paused for a moment and said: "Firstly, there's the cold-hearted attitude of Muslims towards the Chamars and Bhangis, which still lingers within their community. Secondly, Dr. Ambedkar arrived at the conclusion that Buddhism encapsulated the illustrious history of his ancestors. In his quest for national dignity, he awakened the legacy of this historical figure, who narrated the tales of the Mahar people's greatness. In doing so, he undoubtedly filled his community with exceptional confidence, not only by forging connections with Mahatma Buddha's followers but also by unearthing a symbol of national pride in the villages of Koregaon, which commemorates the brave Mahars' victory over Brahmin leaders each year on January 1st."

He continued, with a hint of melancholy: "But when the lion of history awakens, and the idol of national pride envelops you in its enchantment, the space for prudent and independent decision-making diminishes greatly."

Many years later, when Bhima Koregaon made headlines in the media, my conversation with Shaikhul Islam came to mind once again. At that time, I had no idea that Ambedkar had not only provided a pillar of national pride for the Dalits through Bhima Koregaon but, in all honesty, had also set the reverse countdown for the caste-based Brahmin society. The events that unfolded during the 200-year celebration in Koregaon made the world realize for the first time that the movement Ambedkar founded to uplift oppressed communities through reservations and other constitutional safeguards had now taken on the status of a powerful voice. One day, while listening to Prakash Nath Patankar's qawwali, as I reached these lines, I felt as if many knots from my childhood had suddenly been untied:

With words of power, craft your tale,
So the world sees the fire in Bhim's zeal,
If not for Bhim, where would we stand?
By Lord Gautam's grace, we now understand.

Pandus oppressed us in life's cruel game,
Topknots and saffron cloaks were their claim,
Untouchability's weight they did impose,
With arrows of cruelty, injustice arose.

Not just food, but a sip of water we sought,
With Bhimrao's pen, a change was brought,
As he made them dance to his will's design,
Only then did these wolves walk the righteous line.[xxxvii]

I remember, from my younger years, a conversation my father had in a bookshop gathering. He explained that India's secularism didn't stem from the grand vision of those in power, but rather from a practical and political necessity. A concept of a Hindu nation, rooted in the prevailing caste system, would never have been acceptable to Ambedkar and his millions of followers. Only today did I truly grasp the depth of Gandhi's kindness, his empathy, and love for the Harijans.

Gandhi, who had foreseen the crumbling illusion of Hindu majority if lower castes demanded their rights, affectionately called the untouchables 'Harijan,' meaning 'children of God.' He fought for their right to enter temples but strategically obstructed their separate political power. Eventually, in 1932, Ambedkar had to bow to Gandhi's wishes. While he withdrew the demand for separate electorates, reservations for Dalits in political representation, employment, and the symbolic pillar of Bhima Koregaon provided them with a distinct identity.
The 1956 declaration in Nagpur, where Ambedkar and his millions of followers decided to leave the Hindu fold, sent shockwaves through the foundation of the Brahmin society, challenging the status quo and laying the groundwork for a more inclusive future.

Years later, on January 1st, 2018, the efforts to undermine the bicentennial celebration at Koregaon served as a reminder that Ambedkar's movement was still very much alive and thriving beneath the surface. In 1950, an amendment to Section 341 was passed with the intent of binding the Dalits to Hinduism, proclaiming that those who abandoned the religion would no longer be eligible for the benefits of Scheduled Castes.

Despite protests, the benefits were extended to those who embraced Sikhism and Buddhism, but the struggle continues for those who converted to Christianity or Islam. Even today, these Christian and Muslim Dalits remain excluded from the privileges their brethren enjoy, highlighting the enduring influence of Ambedkar's movement and the work that still lies ahead.

47

The Unforgiving Silence of God

As the Ram Mandir movement unfolded, it gradually transformed into a swirling storm of public anger and frustration. Everyday Hindus found themselves caught in the web of Hindu revivalist propaganda, feeling that despite being the majority in their homeland, they were not safe, not secure. An air of indignation hung heavy as they were denied the right to erect a grand temple honoring Lord Ram at his birthplace, all because the government had long been dancing to the tune of Muslim appeasement.

Misguided Muslim leaders, with their hearts filled with pride, believed that their statements held weight in the eyes of the press. Little did they know that while their militant and provocative words grabbed headlines, the press was skillfully weaving these impassioned statements into a tapestry of assertive Hindu narratives, fanning the flames of tension and discontent.

Amidst this chaos, Muslim organizations found themselves embroiled in internal struggles. The Muslim Majlis Mashawart, under the leadership of Syed Shahabuddin (vice-president), faced financial and administrative constraints, which prevented them from holding a national convention. Similarly, the Muslim Personal Law Board seemed unable to address the shortcomings of the Muslim Women Act of 1986.

The scholars on the board were caught in a whirlpool of contradictions, unable to reconcile the interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence with the explicit teachings of the Quran. Issues such as triple talaq, alimony for divorced women, and inheritance rights for orphaned grandsons only added to the confusion, as the views of the jurists conflicted with the Quranic perspective.

This left the scholars in a dilemma – they couldn't merely disregard the jurists, but they also couldn't fully accept these opposing opinions as eternal truths, considering the guidance provided by the Quran. Consequently, the codification process remained shackled to the unyielding waves of uncertainty.

On one hand, Hindu revivalist movements were emerging with new slogans and a renewed sense of purpose, while on the other, Muslim organizations were engulfed in a state of conflict. The Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind was divided, with one faction now led by Maulana Syed Ahmad Hashmi. Meanwhile, Maulana Asad Madani had taken the reins of a self-formed organization called the Emirate of Hind. Institutions like Darul Uloom Deoband and Madrasa Mazahirul Uloom also seemed to be treading the path of sectarian differences.

During this period, if anything had progressed, it was the Central Relief Fund of the Mashawarat, which, according to Syed Shahabuddin, had become operational. The 1987 Meerut riots, particularly the events in Malyana and Hashimpura, had gained notoriety in the Arab world's newspapers. The Arabic press dubbed Meerut as "Meirut" (akin to Beirut), and the oppression faced by Muslims there had moved some philanthropists to contribute small amounts towards the rehabilitation of the affected people.

The tremors from Meerut's tumultuous incidents not only activated the Central Relief Fund of the Mashawarat but also opened up a new arena of social service in the name of relief for many Muslim organizations.

In the midst of this tumultuous landscape, Muslim organizations faced a persistent downward spiral, as irresponsible and incendiary statements from mosque leaders combined with the empty rhetoric of paper organizations like Adam Sena and Emirate of Hind. Simultaneously, a powerful surge of Hindu revivalism swept across the nation, compelling even the Prime Minister to participate in religious ceremonies and visit temples in a bid for political survival and stability. The way forward seemed shrouded in darkness.

For Muslims in this country, it appeared as if they were entering a long, unending night, an abyss of uncertainty and despair that loomed over the horizon, casting a shadow on any semblance of hope.

In the midst of this uncertainty, I found myself engulfed in a whirlwind of unease. Sometimes, I'd wander late into the night on verdant paths, while other times I'd find myself meandering through desolate roads and expansive open fields. It was after the publication of Ghalba-e-Islam that my father made night prayers (Qiyam al-Lail) an obligatory practice for me. Slowly, I began to discover solace and delight in these nocturnal moments, immersing myself in prescribed invocations and prayers, or getting lost in the rhythmic verses of Maulana Rumi's Mathnawi.

During an odyssey to the Arab world, I stumbled upon a book called Ad'iya Mathurah. At first glance, it seemed to be a treasure trove of spiritual seekers' experiences and prescriptions, a compendium of prayers and invocations aimed at fortifying one's connection to the divine. Yet, as I delved deeper, I came to understand that, much like other prayer books, its primary purpose was to keep seekers engaged in their spiritual quests.

In the midst of these uncertain times, I found solace in these nocturnal gatherings, their dimly lit rooms alive with whispered prayers and the echoes of sacred verses. Night after night, I sought refuge from the chaos of the world, questioning whether these spiritual practices could truly alter the course of destiny or conquer the unseen enemies that plagued us.

As I sat among the learned and pious, their lineages woven with the threads of Ali and Abu Bakr, I couldn't help but wonder why their collective efforts had yet to bring about the change they so fervently sought. Would my humble attempts at understanding the intricate meanings of Mathnawi Ma'navi ever amount to anything more than a mere drop in the ocean of their collective knowledge?

Yet, in the quiet corners of those sacred spaces, I found a sense of peace that eluded me elsewhere. Though I couldn't be certain of their efficacy, these spiritual exercises and gatherings became a sanctuary for my weary heart, a place where I could gather the scattered fragments of my hope and dare to believe that, together, we might someday change the world.

One day, I engaged in a conversation with Naqvi Sahab about our country's situation. He inquired if I had read Spinoza. "In this immense universe, the significance of our Earth is no greater than a speck of dust. Yet, consider the humans living on this speck who believe their stories revolve around the universe's center. Some assert that God keeps track of our punishments and rewards, listening to some while disregarding the pleas of others. These are all human delusions. Why would God be concerned with creating an eternal hell for us? Instead, God wishes for us to enjoy the gift of life He has given: to roam through nature's valleys, to place swings beneath trees, and to play soothing melodies by the riverbanks. Be happy and share this joy with others. The rising storm of hatred in our country is also an outcome of religious narratives. Without these narratives, who is Ram and whose birth should be celebrated? However, do religious individuals show any interest in addressing these questions?"

Naqvi Sahab's approach to religion was largely personal and non-confrontational, which added a unique allure to his ever-smiling visage. He refrained from engaging in religious debates and didn't outright reject religion, but instead raised questions before moving on. Across from his residence, Bibi Manzil, stood a neighborhood mosque that had recently been expanded into a large madrasa. His wife consistently made donations to the mosque, and Naqvi Sahab never objected. Instead, he playfully remarked that he had delegated religious responsibilities to his wife.

In contrast, Imam Raza Sahab was more focused on propagating religious teachings. Zia, a devoted student of his, accompanied him to Communist Party meetings. One day, at one such gathering, Zia shared a thought-provoking lesson he had learned. He explained, "God

isn't a separate entity; rather, it is a psychological construct created by our subconscious minds. Humans have invented God as a means to fulfill their unfulfilled desires or to seek assistance from a supreme being that possesses infinite knowledge and power."

I replied, "It seems like you've been delving into Feuerbach's works lately. It's not a bad thing, but it's more enjoyable and insightful to read from the original sources. Otherwise, in casual conversations, it's hard to discern where the truth lies. Even this deeply spiritual quote by Marx is often perceived as an anti-religious statement:

'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.'

So, you managed to find spirituality in Marx as well!" Zia expressed his astonishment.

I responded, "Yes, why not? If you consider these lines in their proper context, you can see a different perspective. According to Marx:

'...the criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.'"

Marx's goal was not to criticize religion itself, but rather the social system that was fundamentally based on injustice. Religion had become a kind of survival strategy for many people, a means to bow down and submit. By criticizing religion, he actually aimed to overthrow the political system that was constantly perpetuating this unhealthy dependency. It is important to remember Engels' statement in 1860 about society, "We have become a secular country in every respect, even our religious concepts have taken on a secular form." Marx understood that until he could uproot the existing system from its foundations, a new system of justice could not rise. In this regard, it can be said that Marx took up the same prophetic mission in his time that sincere reformers have been attempting throughout history.

I somehow managed to say goodbye to Zia, but this nagging question remained lodged in the back of my mind, gnawing away at me: Why did our God - the one so famous for His boundless mercy and compassion - keep subjecting us, the Indian Muslims, to an endless parade of trials and tribulations? Just as we'd barely recovered from one catastrophe, another, even more terrifying, would befall us. Our collective life seemed to be nothing more than a perpetual series of ordeals.

People would say that it was all because of our own mistakes and shortcomings. But try as I might, I couldn't wrap my head around the idea of God being so unrelenting in taking us to task for our transgressions. My own personal experience with God had always been one of warmth and solace. Whenever I called out to Him, He was there, ready and willing to help. It felt like I was walking hand-in-hand with Him, occasionally running off like a mischievous child, only to find Him waiting patiently for me, never taking offense.

I never felt fear in the presence of my God. Sometimes, I would pray, and at other times, I wouldn't. I found solace in the conviction that He knew the ins and outs of my days and nights, that He was my companion in solitude. Why would He ever hold anything against me? But lately, I found myself nursing grievances and complaints against my beloved God. My prayers had become less about pleading and imploring and more about debating and confronting. I could hardly believe that such audacious words were spilling from the lips of someone as powerless as me.

In an attempt to make sense of it all, I decided to chronicle these daring exchanges that took place between God and me during those tumultuous times. I captured them in various cassettes, so I could listen to them later, trying to understand the transformation that had occurred within me:

O Almighty, divine and great,
Is it fated, our woeful state?

For Babri Mosque, our Golgotha waits,
Our vessel of faith, in stormy straits.

Once a hidden treasure, we did find,
But Your revelation, our fate unkind.
The weak oppressed, no solace here,
From hunger and poverty, we shed a tear.

Upon the wall, etched in pain,
A plea for forgiveness, for suffering's bane.
Jacob wrestled with You, side by side,
Yet we, Your final bearers, face a betraying tide.

If we're no more, who'll lift Your name?
The chosen people, You do proclaim.
Alas, Your subtle irony, unmatched,
Our hearts, our souls, forever latched.

Enough we've borne, O Lord, now spare,
The prophetic mission, another's care.
O Rival of the devout, relent we pray,
Forgive us now, and end our dismay.

48

The Holy Procession

In the face of my heart's grievances, where could I possibly turn? The harder I tried to escape this metaphorical noose, the more entangled it seemed to become. It felt as though the same God who guided me in my personal life was now indifferent to my appeals in matters of national importance. But what options did I have? There were no other sanctuaries to seek out.

At times, in the quiet of the night, I would lament in the enigmatic glow of a flickering candle, while in other moments, I would search for fresh solutions amid countless prayers and rituals. I spent a considerable period in this state of unrest, exploring various spiritual approaches such as meditating beneath trees at midnight or eliminating all sources of light to focus on my spiritual growth, all in the hope that a window to divine illumination might open for me. Regrettably, none of these endeavors seemed to create any ripple in the divine realm. To make matters worse, a new tragedy struck the already grief-stricken Indian Muslims.

This time, the heart-wrenching chronicles of anguish arose from Bhagalpur, where Indian Muslims faced an uncharted manifestation of massacre and torment like never before. In Nellie (Assam), whispers of unofficial estimates suggested around ten thousand defenseless Muslims perished, with the bloodbath commencing at dawn and enduring until the dark shroud of nightfall. In Moradabad, the joyous occasion of Eid for Indian Muslims was marred by the crimson stain of blood, as one-sided and unjustifiable police gunfire echoed amidst the Eid prayer congregation.

In Malyana and Hashimpura, young Muslims were handpicked and slaughtered as a harsh lesson, zeroing in on those who dared to exhibit the faintest whisper of protest. The Bhagalpur riots surged beyond the intensity and scope of previous conflicts, for under the watchful eye of

state police, Hindu revivalist organizations orchestrated a meticulous plan to purge Muslims from the country and eradicate them entirely. And in the shadows, the Prime Minister of the time offered unwavering support to this sinister operation.

This plan to expel Muslims was unique in its ferocity and persistence, as the massacre that began with the Ram Shila procession on October 24, 1989, didn't relent for more than two months. It was a twisted reality where the state police not only permitted the rioters' brutality but often spearheaded their violent acts across various locations. An alarming 250 villages succumbed to this expulsion scheme.

The slogans that echoed in the air—such as "Jai Maa Kali - Tatarpur Karo Khali" (Hail Mother Kali - Make Tatarpur Empty) and "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan - Mulla Bhago Pakistan" (Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan - Mulla Run to Pakistan)—held a chilling intensity, even surpassing the bloodthirsty cries of the 1946 Bhagalpur riots, which still send shivers down one's spine when recounted in the *Shahabnama*.

Minnatullah Rahmani, the chronicler of the 1946 riots, poignantly wrote in a letter that the horrors of 1989 were far graver and more widespread than those witnessed in 1946. Back then, visiting the riot-stricken areas, locals expressed a sense of shame for the barbaric acts, but in the independent India of 1989, that shame was nowhere to be found. The pervasive atmosphere of hatred in the affected regions rendered it impossible for Muslims to return to their own villages.

The pervasive sentiment was that the riots were not merely happening by chance but were, in fact, orchestrated with intent. Both state and central governments, controlled by the Congress party, found themselves entangled in this turmoil. Bihar's Chief Minister, Satyendra Narayan Sinha, asserted that his political rivals were using these riots to create difficulties for his administration. The local SP, S.K. Dwivedi, faced accusations of singlehandedly conducting anti-Muslim operations. In response, the state government ordered his immediate transfer.

However, when Rajiv Gandhi arrived on the scene to assess the situation, the curfew-laden city saw Hindu revivalists protesting against Dwivedi's transfer. In a moment of concession, Rajiv Gandhi acquiesced to the protesters, reassuring them that Mr. Dwivedi would stay put.

With the Prime Minister's intervention preventing Dwivedi's transfer, it seemed as if an unspoken declaration had been made, one that all but confirmed the plan to expel Muslims and carry out their complete ethnic cleansing would now receive state backing. As subsequent official and unofficial investigations into the incident came to light, it became glaringly clear that had Dwivedi been timely transferred, the massacre of hundreds of helpless Muslims and the unlawful seizure of their properties could have been stopped in its tracks.

In the wake of the Bhagalpur incident, the Congress government in Bihar crumbled, a political sandcastle succumbing to an inevitable tide. Enter Lalu Prasad, stepping onto the stage of power with promises of security for Muslims as glittering as the footlights. But promises are fragile things, and his fractured too soon. Through his ministerial puppet, Shakeel Ahmad Khan, he started peddling a different story: Muslims, he implored, should forget their pain, bury their sectarian grievances in the name of harmony, to birth a new beginning.

What did we get? An unending saga of torment. Muslim places of worship, their lands, their homes - all still lie vulnerable under the oppressive hand of lawlessness. Muslims, in their own homeland, find themselves navigating a life of displacement, homelessness, deprivation - a cocktail of despair with no reprieve in sight.

And then there's Nitish Kumar, once a beacon of hope for Muslims, who had rightly called out Lalu Yadav's hypocrisy, and accused him of giving refuge to criminals like Kamleshwar Yadav of Bhagalpur. But oh, how the mighty fall. His government's decision to appoint a man like Dwivedi - a police officer no less - as the head of Bihar Police is a twisted turn in the tale. It's a puzzle, a riddle wrapped in an enigma,

the political and ideological implications of which are harder to untangle than a Gordian knot.

This phrase, 'Mr Dwivedi will remain here,' latched onto my memory, conjuring up an internal maelstrom each time it resurfaced. It was now undeniably evident that every twist and turn of life in this country had Muslims face-to-face with varying forms of Dwivedis. The government's brazen proclamation that Dwivedi would persist here, irrespective of their identities' severity or their heinous crimes, was chilling. No psychological salve would soothe the Muslims' wounds, not even the illusion of temporary transfers. The more I delved into this predicament, the more I found myself entrapped in a vortex of crippling despair.

Dwivedi's malice towards Muslims had become public gossip. It was a widely known fact that he had been in cahoots with retaliatory Hindus, plotting a mass slaughter of Muslims for months. On October 24th, when he allowed the Ramshila procession to pass through a Muslim district, chaos reigned supreme, transforming the area into a grim spectacle of murder and pillage. Following this, Dwivedi's transfer was seen as a mundane, logical step. It was, at the bare minimum, a move anticipated not only by the beleaguered Muslims but also by other peace-aspiring Hindus.

In his memoir, 'Meri Yaadein, Meri Bhoolen' (My Memories, My Oversights), Satindra Narain lifted the veil on a secret from years past. He wrote of a time when Rajiv Gandhi, then Prime Minister, was visiting Bhagalpur to assess the turbulent situation. En route from the helipad to the Circuit House, Gandhi was met with demonstrations at multiple locations—protests led by Hindu revanchists. Their demand was stark: to halt the proposed transfer of Dwivedi, arguing that his absence would compromise the safety of Hindus. Among the protesters were undercover police officers, and their combined pressure swayed Gandhi. In a decision made on the spur of the moment, he accepted their demand, pacifying the heated crowd with a firm declaration, 'Mr. Dwivedi will remain here.'

It was the last week of December, and the winter chill was at its peak. One day, I found myself in the central hall of Maulana Azad Library, where a new section dedicated to newspapers and magazines had recently been established. I was browsing through the latest issue of India Today, which detailed the ongoing violence in the city, even two months after the riots had begun. Fear and terror loomed everywhere. Approximately 30,000 people had been forced to seek refuge in relief camps. Bloodshed would resume as soon as the curfew was relaxed. There seemed to be no clear indication of when the situation would normalize.

Malka Begum, the sole survivor among the Muslim population in Chandieri village, said her confidence had been shattered. On the other hand, eight-year-old Agni Kumari was described as being terrified, clinging to her mother. Her face had been injured in a bomb attack. Mohammad Jahangir couldn't fathom taking his rickshaw into a Hindu area, just as Lallan Shah couldn't enter a Muslim area in search of passengers. Both sides shared the same reason: Hindus were afraid of Muslims, and Muslims were afraid of Hindus.

Mohammad Bahram, a prominent silk trader in the city with an export business that extended as far as New York, was now considering relocating his enterprise to West Bengal.

While I was engrossed in this report, I suddenly felt a light pat on my shoulder. "So, you've returned to the world of newspapers and magazines," he whispered in my ear. I glanced up, having already recognized Shamsi's voice. He asked, "What are you reading? This is all garbage. These reports don't accurately depict the situation. The world of journalism is performing a balancing act, deliberately obfuscating the truth. Readers are led to believe the matter is equal, as if a genuine Hindu-Muslim conflict is taking place, with both sides experiencing equal levels of fear. While Malka Begum's eyes are filled with terror on one side, Agni Kumari is no less frightened on the other. However, the reality is that what's happening in Bhagalpur is not a sectarian conflict, but a systematic expulsion of Muslims, accompanied by state-sponsored ethnic cleansing.

More than 90% of the affected population is Muslim, and the refugee camps have been predominantly established by them. The media has circulated false reports that Muslims have taken refuge in Islam Nagar, while Hindus have sought shelter in Ram Nagar camps, but no one seems to know the actual locations of these two places. The fact is, the actual situation in Bhagalpur, which deeply impacts the Muslim community, is not even one-tenth covered in the media. You may not have read the report in Indo-Bharati regarding this issue." As he spoke, Shamsi pulled out an issue of EPW (Economic and Political Weekly) from the shelf in front of him. It was likely the December 3rd issue, which had raised questions about the biased role of the Bihar government. The author had written in unequivocal terms:

''The Bihar Military Police (BMP) personnel actively encouraged the rioters and even participated in attacking and killing Muslims. Around 150 Muslims, who were rescued from Chanderi village by the army and handed over to the BMP in a protection camp, were all killed. Despite persistent demands, including from Md Hussain Azad, a minister in the state government, BMP units were not removed from the affected areas. For three days, it was the BMP, well known for its communal bias against the minority community and held responsible for the May riots in Hazaribagh, even by ministers of the state government, which was in command in the worst-affected district of Bhagalpur. Even a few hours before Rajiv Gandhi's visit to the city, as many as thirty people were slaughtered in the Nayabazar area. The BMP was very much deployed in the close vicinity.''

Further on, the author had written:

''In some places, entire families of the minority community were burned alive in their houses, which were set on fire in the dead of night. Localities like Nathnagar, Champanagar, Nayabazar, Sahebganj, Parbatti, Ishaqchak, Jogsar, Karia, Rehmanpur, and Mansurganj have been devastated beyond recognition. Villages like Chanderi and Sandehri have been entirely wiped out.

In the Champanagar and Nathnagar areas, famous for their silk textile industry, not a single weaver family has been spared. The looms have been destroyed, and all this was done systematically to force the Muslim loom-owners and weavers to leave the areas. The official death toll in Bhagalpur and surrounding areas has crossed 250. However, unofficial figures estimate the deaths at around one thousand or even higher. Two truckloads of bodies were reportedly dumped into the Ganga river by the administration."

The reporter claimed that:

"The killings in Bhagalpur, Sitamarhi, Munger and Motihari have shattered the faith of the Muslims in the government all throug'h Bihar. So terrorised were they that three or four days before November 9, the day on which the foundation was to be laid at Ayodhya, petty Muslim shopkeepers had fled from Patna closing down their shops. More than a week has passed since then and it is only now that they have begun to come back, their faith in the system visibly shattered."

The situation was incredibly delicate. On one hand, extremist Hindu organizations received full backing from the government machinery, while on the other, defenseless Muslims had no one to rely on except for God. The vulnerability with which they were taken from their homes to their deaths, and the manner in which Muslim populations were evacuated from village after village, indicated that they had no strength left to defend themselves. In such a situation, what should Muslims do? How should they protect their lives and property, and what are Islam's clear teachings in this regard? Moreover, how should a strategic and prophetic plan of action be implemented given the current circumstances? I addressed these questions in my booklet titled 'The Need for a Muslim Militia'.

This booklet was distributed among friends with the same care and caution as Maulvi Minnatullah Rehmani's booklet reached his supporters during the Emergency era. Only a few weeks had passed since its publication when the secret police sprang into action, raiding

the library. The police ransacked the insides of cupboards, drawers, and files, overturning and scattering countless documents and papers. But the booklets were neither found nor likely to be found, as God had seemingly cast a veil over their vision. The 'Muslim Militia' booklets, cleverly disguised with Urdu grammar, remained hidden, rendering the secret police's hours-long operation fruitless.

During this period, Bihar's Chief Minister changed. The new Congress Chief Minister, Jagannath Mishra, had a favorable reputation among the Muslim community concerning Urdu. This change immediately instilled a sense of psychological relief. However, not even three months into his term, the Congress party suffered a devastating loss in the new state elections, and Lalu Yadav emerged as the Chief Minister. Although the new government was established with the intention of safeguarding the Muslim community, in practice, throughout its 15-year rule, it failed to undertake effective efforts to rehabilitate the displaced Muslims of Bhagalpur or ensure the restoration of their lands.

In 1995, years after the horrifying Bhagalpur massacre, the truth was finally revealed in the Bhagalpur Riots Inquiry Commission Report. It was discovered that in many instances, the police had not bothered to register a First Information Report (FIR). Only 595 FIRs were filed in total, covering a range of incidents, from looting and arson to murder.

According to the police's own records, the death toll stood at 982, but only 354 of these victims were mentioned in the FIRs. This discrepancy left a significant number of deaths - around five hundred - unaccounted for in the investigative process, a fact even admitted by the police. Perpetrators were seen walking freely, while the witnesses who had seen them commit these heinous acts lacked the courage to identify them. The late filing of these FIRs further complicated matters as it made the gathering of witnesses exceedingly difficult.

A case in point was the village of Logai, where a shocking mass grave of 108 bodies was hidden beneath an ordinary cabbage patch, with the

police's complicity. The FIR for this horrifying event was registered a staggering forty-one days later. Such a delay in reporting a grave incident raised serious concerns about the motives of those responsible for filing the reports.

Moreover, because many of the culprits were either part of the government machinery or had strong connections within it, 416 of the 595 FIRs did not mention any specific individuals. What was even more distressing was that the police filed formal charge sheets in only 140 of the FIR cases. The rest were prematurely closed, with the lack of witnesses cited as the reason. The court, accepting the police's justification, closed the case files. Regrettably, it did not have the foresight to reject these 400 FIRs and instead direct these cases to be handed over to a different investigative agency.

In the aftermath of the massacre, a handful of survivors emerged, their stories providing a haunting recounting of the horrors that unfolded. Among them were Ashraf Ali from Logain, Mohammad Javed from Parbati, and Malika Begum from Chanderi. Their testimonies, painfully personal and deeply distressing, shed light on the brutal incidents that occurred across 250 villages. Without their voices, the terrifying details about who was killed, where, and how, might have been lost in the annals of history.

Logain, a village that saw the macabre concealment of mass graves under an unassuming cabbage patch, was highlighted in a report from the Collector's Office. It noted with chilling brevity that out of the 105 victims, more than half—52, to be precise—were children. Mani Khan, a central figure in the relief operations, expressed the heart-wrenching sight of discovering innocent children's ribbons and tiny shoes among the bodies, a poignant reminder of the lives brutally cut short.

Ashraf Ali's trauma persisted long after the violence ended. Seeing the clothes of his wife and mother, he would be seized by bouts of panic, the painful memories still fresh and unrelenting.

Malika Begum shared her harrowing experience: "In Logain, Muslims had huddled together in one house for safety. The army came and went, but after their departure, people were forcibly extracted from their homes. That's when the carnage started. A mob of rioters advanced, methodically hacking away at the terrified people, first from the front, then from behind. People were dismembered, their throats were slit, their bellies ripped open."

Javed, who miraculously survived despite losing twelve members of his family, could even identify the killers. He had narrowly escaped the onslaught led by individuals named Goswami and Mandal, yet he could not voice their names. The police and rioters had systematically hunted down Muslims, dragging them out from their homes. The Inquiry Commission's report chillingly compared this to Nazi tactics, stating, "The manner in which the search was conducted was reminiscent of the searches in occupied Europe by the Nazis."

The Bhagalpur massacre stands as one of the most brutal episodes of violence against Muslims in a partitioned India. The intent of this act was not just the systematic eradication of the Muslim community, but also their forced assimilation and the usurpation of their lands and properties. Distressingly, reports suggest that even today, approximately three thousand acres of land, once owned by Muslims, remain under non-Muslim occupation. The various commissions established to provide justice for the victims have largely overlooked this aspect of the atrocity.

During this period, political regimes emerged that ostensibly represented the interests of the Muslim community. Political leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar were often viewed favorably by Muslim leaders. A notable instance of this perceived alliance involved Maulvi Mujahid Al-Islam, who held the position of a Qazi of Sharia and later ascended to the role of Amir-e-Shariat. He was photographed sharing sweets with Lalu Prasad Yadav, a gesture symbolizing camaraderie and mutual respect. Such images were frequently published in newspapers, giving an impression of unity between the political and Muslim leadership. However, these symbolic

gestures fell short of addressing the profound systemic issues that arose from the massacre and its consequent injustices.

During Nitish Kumar's tenure as Chief Minister, a significant gathering of Muslims took place at the Gandhi Maidan in Patna. Nitish Kumar demonstrated such apparent generosity that he found it essential to nominate the organizer of the meeting as a Member of Legislative Council (MLC) on that very evening. Yet, despite these amicable relations with Muslim leadership, justice remained beyond reach for the victims of Bhagalpur.

Years later, in 2016, the authors of 'Splintered Justice' unveiled a striking similarity between the systemic denial of justice in the 1989 Bhagalpur riots and the 2002 Gujarat riots. Moreover, both incidents intentionally left wounds open and healing neglected. The Bhagalpur riots occurred during the Congress's tenure, and the severity of the incident was significantly downplayed due to the complacency of government-endorsed Muslim clergy and the political distractions of Muslim leaders. In contrast, the atrocities of the Gujarat incident gained increasingly clear recognition over time due to the absence of immediate aid from state-sponsored Muslim representatives and religious clerics.

A few months after the Bhagalpur massacre, when I reached my homeland, I noticed a flurry of invisible activities centered around my father's persona. People, never seen before, seeming simple rustic folks from who knows where, would come, chat for a few moments, draw courage, and then continue on their way. After my father's arrest during the emergency, we had a vague idea of this underground and silent network of his admirers and followers, which now seemed to be fully activated. People came from distant places. I could not understand who these people were, where they came from.

One day, a venerable elder with a snow-white beard graced us with his presence. His countenance glowed like *Khidr*, a mystical figure in Islamic tradition. My father introduced me to him. "Ah, you must be Rashid Mian," he uttered, embracing me with overwhelming affection.

He held my hand for a few precious moments, imparting his wisdom: "Son, your timely publication has been a beacon. You spurred people to rise and act courageously. The most daunting battles are won with unyielding courage and tenacity. Our community in Sitamarhi was grappling with a predicament akin to the one in Bhagalpur, with certain Muslim enclaves under threat. Malicious armed groups were hatching a sinister plan for the mass slaughter of innocent Muslims. We reside in a region predominantly occupied by non-Muslims, whose hearts harbored a fiery hatred against us. However, our children chose a path of assertive action over succumbing to a helpless demise. Our village, with a modest population of around one hundred and fifty individuals, including children and the elderly, rallied together. We honed the rudimentary weapons at our disposal and everyone, men and women, the young and the old, donned masculine attire. We wrapped white turbans around our heads and, armed with sticks and farming tools, marched under the moonlit sky onto the main thoroughfare. This solemn procession meandered through the village and its outskirts, and then returned. Yet, anyone who witnessed this spectacle was awestruck. It was as if celestial beings had descended from the heavens to shield the faithful. Our determination was unwavering, and our children stood ready to choose martyrdom over a passive death. When you brace yourself for death, life bends down to venerate you."

During this tumultuous period, my father, with great resilience, managed to raise a significant donation for the victims of the Bhagalpur massacre, despite our own precarious financial situation. In the wake of the atrocity, a fierce struggle of resilience and courage was being fought throughout Bihar, a battle my father was resolutely determined not to lose. He didn't just withhold criticism concerning the challenges brought about by the publication of my booklet; he became my stalwart ally in its defense. The covert surveillance and potential repercussions from the authorities could have escalated, but fortunately, a dramatic change occurred in the political theatre of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The incumbent Congress administrations were displaced in both states. At the national level, V.P. Singh ascended to

the Prime Ministership. In an alignment of fate, it was during this transformative time that my journey to Sudan for advanced Arabic studies was ordained.

Several months later, upon my return from Sudan, the echoes of my publication were still very much present within the Islamic circles of Aligarh. In the intervening period, various delegations from covert agencies had frequently made the journey from Delhi to Aligarh with investigative intent. In view of these covert police activities, some well-intentioned individuals had even conjectured that I might be apprehended as soon as I set foot back in India, possibly straight off the plane. Yet, by divine providence, no such incident occurred.

Nonetheless, these formal investigative procedures, typically initiated in the context of Muslim community activities with an aim to incite fear among young Muslims, began to be manipulated by a few wily detractors for their own hostile propaganda against me. I was depicted as an uncompromising and radical youth, whose very presence could potentially cause upheaval in the tranquil academic environment of the campus.

Professor Jafar Zaki, now the head of the English department, had always been a beacon of support and understanding, particularly considering my commitment to religious endeavors. He displayed the same tender warmth towards my fellow Iranian and Iraqi students, who also pursued the advancement of faith with zeal. He instructed me to take on teaching assignments from the very beginning of the new academic year. With the official appointment just days away, he entrusted me with my portion of work, and I plunged into preparing for the interview.

However, when the interview results emerged, my name was conspicuously absent from the list—like a void where I believed I should be. The selection committee, led by Professor Jafar Zaki himself, had deemed me unfit. The very same professor who had personally extended the offer to me had now withdrawn his faith in me. What could have sparked this abrupt change in his decision?

For me, this predicament carried more significance than the appointment itself. It rattled the foundation of my relationship with my esteemed mentor, the one who had guided me through academia's maze with unwavering love and support. At that moment, it felt as though I had drowned in the shallowest of waters, my life snuffed out by a crushing and inexplicable betrayal.

One day, as I left the sanctuary of the Azad Library, my gaze landed on my esteemed professor. He gestured for me to come closer, and inquired about my well-being. His eyes were filled with an unspoken regret. It was apparent that he wanted to convey something, but the words seemed to evade him. He walked with me to the department, engaging in casual conversation, as if he was mustering the courage to reveal his inner thoughts. Following that encounter, my passion for Aligarh gradually faded. I journeyed across numerous countries before eventually settling in Delhi, where I founded a weekly newspaper, the Times International, which continued to operate for several years. During this time, whenever I visited Aligarh, I felt fortunate to be in the presence of my warm-hearted professor. One day, unable to restrain himself any longer, he spoke up, "Rashid Mian! A burden weighed heavily on my heart. The reality is that people had frightened me." His words seemed out of place and disconnected from our conversation. He did not mention any specific names, but the implication was clear. Together, we continued our discussion, expressing our shared sorrow that the damage inflicted on those working for the community by investigative agencies was overshadowed by the harm caused by the cowardly, twisted, and divisive propaganda that forced them to the margins of society.

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Echoes of a Broken Night

In Aligarh, there wasn't much left to captivate my attention. I had already earned my PhD degree. My education in Arabic, acquired in Sudan, provided me with connections in both the Eastern and Western worlds. During this period, I also established deep relationships with various peace movements in the West. This unique world, initially full of surprises, was inhabited by diverse Sufi-minded individuals who devoted themselves to creating a new world, and I grappled with understanding where to begin my work. Sometimes the dream of a luxurious life would tempt me, while at other times, revolutionary thoughts would surface.

During those days, I often dreamt of finding myself in far-off places or descending from towering buildings, the narrow ledges making it difficult to breathe, causing me to wake up. I once traveled to Hejaz, the Holy Land, hoping to reach a final decision about my future in the seclusion of the Haram. However, due to my extensive connections in Islamic circles, even solitude in the Haram proved unattainable. One day, as I leaned against the Hateem, lost in thought, Hashim Mehdi insisted on taking me to his home. From the column where I leaned, it seemed as if God had placed a familiar figure there, as though someone was constantly watching over me.

One day, I made Masjid al-Nabawi my focal point, immersed in the sight of the green dome, detached from the world and everything within it, when Sheikh al-Hussein patted my shoulder, exclaiming, "MashaAllah! MashaAllah!" Memories of our past meetings were revived. During that time, the Sheikh lived in a flat connected to Masjid al-Nabawi, where the Malukhiyya dish was always delectable.

In the East, there were proponents of the awakening, some of whom, like me, held PhDs in English language and literature, occupied prestigious positions, while in the West, there were champions of the

peace movement. Among them were Quakers in search of inner light, as well as independent-minded, urbanely disillusioned individuals who longed for a utopian world where they could pursue a simple and natural life. During those days, I carried a small, bag-like possession that represented my entire universe. Life was uncomplicated and transcended materialism. I would sometimes visit the East, lifting my little bag, and at other times, I would delight in the company of the West's dignitaries. The decision remained unresolved. Choosing to live life unconventionally was no easy task.

While I was still in this state of uncertainty, I received an invitation to participate in a week-long international workshop in the Netherlands, centered on non-violence. For a "radical," "militant," and revolutionary young man, attending such a workshop held significant value as an opportunity for personal transformation. I immediately decided to participate.

In this diverse international workshop, participants came from various corners of the world, with a majority being European students. Many of them had recently completed their education and were on the brink of starting their practical lives with different welfare organizations.

Jill, an American attendee, had earned her MA in Peace Studies from Notre Dame and was about to assume a significant role in a Dutch welfare organization the following month. Natasha and Yuri had recently embarked on their careers at a Russian television network. Natasha's passionate voice captivated listeners whenever she sang; her melodies evoked a sense of ecstasy, making people wish that time would stand still and the song would never end.

Terry, the eldest among the group, had spent a considerable amount of time participating in revolutionary movements in Northern Ireland. Now, he sought to embrace the path of non-violence. Sofia, once an important member of the Socialist Party in East Germany, struggled with severe mental distress due to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and her sorrowful eyes occasionally revealed her pain through tears.

Lilianna, a dance student from Ukraine, aspired to use her art form to promote peace worldwide. She even offered to teach me how to dance, but our conversation never advanced beyond casual pleasantries.

In the workshop, a variety of programs took place from morning until evening. At times, a renowned scholar and peace activist would join us, and other times, small groups of students would engage in collaborative problem-solving. Despite the diverse intellectual and ideological backgrounds of the participants, the continuous interaction and discussions over several days fostered a sense of community among us.

Adjacent to the conference hall was a modest library where Abbe, the driving force and host of this workshop, busied himself overseeing administrative matters. Once the formalities were over, we began exploring their library. To my astonishment, I discovered an extensive collection of videotapes related to Jewish people. This new finding became an engaging pastime during my free time. My first formal introduction to Jewish scholars such as Professor Lieboch, Rabbi Tettlebaum, Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt, Ben Ahrenreich, Israel Shahak, and numerous others took place here. I also learned that not all Jews support the State of Israel. For example, Jewish rabbis like Moshe Lieb Hirsch of the Neturei Karta faction firmly oppose a Zionist state, even if it were to receive Arab backing. Rabbi Samson Hirsch, a distinguished 19th-century rabbi, even considered any organized movement to return to Palestine a sinful act.

One day, Abbe found himself with some spare time. The majority of the workshop participants had set off for an evening stroll, while a few others were engrossed in conversation on the iron benches amidst the verdant surroundings outside. During this time, the hostess entered the library with her daughter Shasha, carrying tea supplies, and the conversation naturally shifted to the era of Nazi rule in the Netherlands.

"In Amsterdam, where the rows of towering houses stand supported by the canals, I was born in one of those homes. Then the Nazis arrived,

and everything changed," Abbe shared his life story so suddenly and concisely that at first, I couldn't comprehend the context of his words. Upon further reflection, I experienced a fleeting moment of unease, unfamiliarity, and fear that seemed to touch my very essence. Could it be that Abbe was also connected to a Jewish group? And the hostess? She identified herself as the daughter of a conservative, traditional bishop. Highly respected in peace advocacy circles, the couple was known for their integrity and devotion to service.

Jews had been, up until now, merely a subject of academic interest for me. When I unexpectedly discovered Abbe's connection to Jewish heritage, I was momentarily stunned. Since childhood, I had carried within me a negative and enigmatic perception of Jews. Now, destiny had arranged for me to encounter a Jewish individual who was not only a firsthand witness to the horrors of the Nazis but also a fierce critic of the State of Israel.

One day, while browsing through the library, I came across a videotape labeled: Kristallnacht 50. Initially, I had no idea what "Kristallnacht" was. Driven by curiosity, I started watching the tape and discovered that it tells the story of a tragic night when the Nazis unleashed a reign of terror upon the Jewish community in Germany. The incident began when a Polish Jewish youth, frustrated by his circumstances, shot a German diplomat in Paris. This event provided the perfect opportunity for the Nazi government to further vilify the Jews. The German propaganda minister expressed extreme outrage over the incident, and with the government's support, the entire German nation took to the streets to seek revenge on the Jews.

The night of November 9, 1938, was nothing short of an apocalyptic event throughout Germany and Nazi-occupied Austria. Organized mobs of German nationalists targeted Jewish homes, places of worship, and commercial properties all night long. For two days, looting, murder, and destruction went unchecked. The fire brigade intervened only to prevent the flames from spreading to non-Jewish areas. It is said that in just these two days, 91 Jews were killed, over 250 synagogues were burned to ashes, and around 30,000 people were

forcibly removed from their homes by the police and sent to concentration camps.

As dawn broke, it revealed a scene of utter devastation across the country: shattered glass, broken doors, burning buildings, and looted possessions. Witnessing this horrifying landscape, the Jewish community realized that they had no future left in Germany.

At the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, a commemorative program was held where a Jewish Rabbi delivered a poignant sermon on the significance of silence. Addressing the audience, he said, "Esteemed attendees, our connection with Kristallnacht is deep-rooted, spanning generations. When we were living in exile in Babylon following the destruction of the temple, it was likely that a wedding celebration was taking place. People were brimming with joy and happiness, as is customary on such occasions. However, amidst the celebration, a wise man stood up and declared, 'The temple lies in ruins, the kingdom established by David and Solomon has been usurped, we have been driven from the land of Canaan, and exile has become our destiny. And yet, your faces are adorned with smiles and there is an overwhelming sense of happiness, as if nothing has transpired.' As he spoke, he forcefully shattered an exquisitely crafted and highly valuable glass vase before him. A resounding crash filled the room, leaving an engulfing silence in its wake. 'Dear friends! This is the Kristallnacht mentioned in the Talmud. Within this silence, there are profound lessons to be learned.'"

One type of silence implies acceptance. Fifty years ago, on November 9th and 10th, the entire German nation remained silent as atrocities were committed against the Jewish people. This silence essentially meant that they tacitly supported the genocide. Another reason for silence is when influential individuals in society, who initially survive due to their social status and influence, remain silent to avoid getting caught in difficulties. My brothers, such people bear great responsibility. They are complicit in the crime. The mindset of "we are safe, why should we speak?" essentially makes you a part of the

criminals. One kind of silence is when a person stays quiet to reflect, to think about the crisis they are in, and what the way out could be.

I mentioned the Talmud earlier; today, on the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, the haunting sounds of shattered glass question what we have learned from this event. Just a few days after the incident, the then US President held a press conference where he condemned the tragedy. When asked if the US would change its immigration policy in light of the dire situation faced by the Jews in Germany, he flatly denied it. Brothers, hollow sympathy without any commitment to action is akin to being complicit in the crime. And yes, where were the Jewish organizations at that time, what were they doing? Elie Wiesel, who himself experienced the torture camps, wrote that when the Holocaust ended, they thought the world had learned a lesson from this event, and perhaps humanity would never face such a situation again. However, only a few years have passed since the Holocaust, and many people are not ready to believe that the Holocaust actually occurred.

People, let us make a firm pledge that we will never allow another Kristallnacht to happen. The everlasting kingdom of David awaits you. Next year in Jerusalem! O rivers of Babylon! "If we forget Jerusalem, may our right hand wither."

The rabbi's speech contained the same intensity and heightened tone that is typically characteristic of religious scholars' conversations in our society. I asked Abbe, "It has been fifty years since the Kristallnacht incident, but listening to these speeches makes it feel as if it happened just yesterday. In this documentary, photos and newspaper clippings have been skillfully incorporated, making it seem as if the Nazi era of 1938 has come to life with various dimensions right before our eyes. Why do the Jewish people feel the need to keep the memory of the Nazi era so vividly alive in their minds?"

He articulated, "One purpose indeed is to ensure that such a catastrophic incident doesn't recur in the future. It's a call for perpetual vigilance from the populace. Yet another reason is the

evolving academic curiosity about the Holocaust as a field of scholarly investigation, which has sparked people's interest in its intricate details and causal factors. When the survivors from the torture camps began to pen down their personal experiences, it was beyond anyone's wildest conjecture that the Holocaust would eventually emerge as a recognized academic discipline and that Holocaust museums worldwide would gain prominence as frequented sites of public interest."

He replied, "Certainly! In one respect, this is an encouraging aspect of the 'Never Again!' narrative. There's a widespread sentiment of remorse for past mistakes among the people. The remnants of infamous concentration camps such as Auschwitz, and the public visits they receive, continually send out a message: that oppression leaves an indelible mark on a nation's conscience. However, this Jewish declaration against tyranny and injustice has slowly evolved into somewhat of a cult. We mourn our own suffering, erect museums in its memory - which, in itself, is not inherently wrong. However, we often fail to acknowledge the suffering inflicted upon others."

I commented, "That's a profound insight. Are there other Jewish intellectuals who view the 'Never Again!' narrative as being somewhat narrow-minded?"

He responded, "Indeed! A lot of people realize that we, the Jewish people, who rallied around the idea of rebuilding our temple, may not have been able to reconstruct Solomon's Temple, but we certainly built a modern-day temple in the form of the Holocaust Museum. Here, figures like Elie Wiesel take on the role of the Chief Rabbi with significant reverence."

"Elie Wiesel? The one who wrote 'Night'? He even has a Nobel Prize in Literature," I attempted to demonstrate my knowledge of Wiesel.

He retorted: "Yes, Elie is indeed an esteemed writer and I have great respect for his craft. But what perplexes me is his ability to deeply empathize with the suffering of his own people and their historical traumas, yet he seems to ignore the anguish of other nations. I've

never seen him utter a word against the atrocities committed on Palestinians. However, there are other Jewish writers and poets who have consistently critiqued the State of Israel. Some have even gone as far as stating that Palestinians have become the 'new Jews' in Israel, and we, the Jewish people, have unfortunately taken on the role of the Nazis. So, it's not like we don't have people who speak the truth among us. But it's disheartening to see a notable figure like Elie Wiesel, a Nobel laureate, seemingly oblivious to the wrongdoings of the State of Israel. It's a truly regrettable situation."

"Why is it like this?" I inquired.

He responded, "Speaking the truth isn't always straightforward, particularly when it involves criticizing one's own people who usually place you on a pedestal. Those who articulate the truth often end up being pushed to the fringes. It is those who align themselves with the establishment who are most frequently adorned with honors and distinctions. This pattern is prevalent across all societies and historical periods. These well-known figures you see, who are revered and respected, are often protected by their governments. This support typically stems from their reluctance to voice the entire truth. Until the truth is entirely revealed, fearlessly and unequivocally, it remains tainted with a shade of deception."

Abbe's words were a profound shock to me. Elie Wiesel was an individual I greatly admired. In my view, as a scholar of literature, he occupied a significant position. I was taken aback to discover that Elie Wiesel, who had courageously unveiled the atrocities of the Nazis to the world, was not just silent on the issue of Palestine, but also unapologetically aligned himself with the State of Israel.

Is it truly such a challenge to speak the truth? When I observed my surroundings, it dawned upon me that perhaps only a handful of individuals ever tell the complete truth. Particularly those who are idolized by the Muslim populace, who are enveloped by an aura of reverence, and whose prestige is defined by their international journeys—most of these people have pledged their unwavering

allegiance to various sectarian factions and their governing patrons. Some champion the cause of the Saudi bloc, while others are staunch supporters of the Iranian revolution. Each has their own justifications, but none dares to voice the truth against their revered governments. Indeed, the majority can't muster the courage to advocate for their downtrodden Indian brethren in the media during their overseas trips. Even in India, their voices barely rise. I was reminded of the Muslim Consultative Assembly in Delhi following the Moradabad massacre, a tale recounted by Halim Bhaei. Muslim leaders were hesitant to visit Moradabad immediately until they received approval from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. When they finally did, it was more a token gesture than a genuine visit. No exploration of the affected areas, no initiatives to assist the beleaguered Muslims, and no attempts to initiate legal proceedings against the perpetrators. However, a grand rally did occur in Lucknow, where the florid rhetoric of political leaders conveyed the misleading impression that Muslims were not in danger in this country. The haunting memory of the Nellie massacre, an act of extreme barbarity where defenseless Muslims were forcefully dragged from their homes and systematically slaughtered in their thousands, still lingers. Amidst this horror, the silence from Muslim political leaders was deafening, and there was a conspicuous absence of outrage among the learned scholars. Similarly, the Hashimpura massacre would have slipped into obscurity, if not for the principled intervention of police officers like Vibhuti Narain. And yet, despite these atrocities, our scholars and leaders repeatedly insisted that Islam is unfettered and Muslims are safe in India. They maintained that the country is governed by the principles of secular democracy, and it is our duty as Muslims to work relentlessly to uphold and strengthen this secularism.

I reflected and recognized that partial truths can indeed be devastating. They dismiss the wails and entreaties of oppressed Palestinians. They celebrate life within the stranglehold of secularism as a virtue. Half-truths, masked under the pretense of practicality and wisdom, transform us into embodiments of complacency. While

falsehoods are often easily discernible, challenging the half-truths put forth by esteemed entities is not a straightforward endeavor.

Watching the video of Kristallnacht, I found myself engulfed in a whirlwind of thoughts, emotions, and realizations that seemed to pierce my very soul. It struck me like a thunderbolt that those nations capable of dissecting their histories, unearthing the raw truth, and branding events with fitting names, are the ones that can grasp the gravity of a situation and stand tall against the tide of time, preventing history from repeating itself. On the flip side, there are those who flounder in the quagmire of their tragedies, unable to analyze or label them accordingly, thus remaining trapped in an unending cycle of despair.

Kristallnacht, a name bestowed by the cold, merciless hands of the Nazis, became an emblem of pain and suffering for the Jewish people. They filled this night of shattered glass with the wails of their tormented souls until it became a living memory, an annual reminder of a darkness that must never be allowed to fall again. The air would come alive with their cries of "Never Again! Never Again!", resounding like a clarion call to the world.

In stark contrast, we, the Indian Muslims, seem to drift aimlessly through the currents of our national and communal experiences, unable to provide an accurate analysis or attach a fitting name to our own tragedies. As a result, our catastrophic events of mass murder and ethnic cleansing are reduced to a mere "unrest" – a word that fails to capture the true depth of our suffering.

Germany's Kristallnacht may have lasted only two days, but in Bhagalpur, the nightmare stretched on for two agonizing months. Village after village was left devoid of Muslims, their homes and lives shattered like the very glass that gave Kristallnacht its name. Thousands of women were left devastated, and the displaced Muslims wandered without respite, still searching for a sanctuary that has yet to be found. Governments have come and gone, but the tears of the Muslims continue to fall, like raindrops in an unending storm. And

even our own Muslim leadership, in the name of peace and goodwill, has chosen to compromise with our heart-wrenching reality.

I pondered deeply, trying to fathom why we don't give our recurring catastrophes and misfortunes - the ones we face in our divided Indian subcontinent - an apt name. It struck me that phrases like "mass murder," "ethnic cleansing," "forced displacement," or the anguish caused by state-sponsored terrorism all seem inadequate to encapsulate the gravity of our plight. It feels as though we, the Indian Muslims, have been in free fall, tumbling into a bottomless abyss for decades, each moment adding to the velocity of our descent and the torment of our existence. If only this relentless cycle could pause for a moment, maybe we could find a befitting name for it.

Just like Moradabad, Nellie, and Meerut, memories of Bhagalpur's Kristallnacht seemed to dissolve into the hazy abyss of our collective consciousness. The state's unrelenting, coercive machine kept grinding away at the powerless Muslims. In the midst of it all, as if in defiance of any semblance of justice, the Babri Mosque's demolition unfolded in broad daylight and under the scrutiny of the media's watchful eye.

Time moved on, and in 2002, we found ourselves engulfed by another Kristallnacht-like situation in Gujarat. Over two thousand Muslims met a violent end, and hundreds more were burned alive. Still, no one dared to whisper the word Kristallnacht. It was only during the Delhi "riots" of 2020 when we heard the term Kristallnacht, uttered by a young Cambridge University lecturer, Priya Gopal. Through her video message, she warned the world that what the Muslims faced in Delhi was not a mere Hindu-Muslim clash but the same Kristallnacht that the Jews endured in Nazi Germany.

Three decades slipped away between the Bhagalpur incident and the mass killings in Delhi. It was then, and only then, that Indian Muslims could come to terms with the reality that what they confronted in this country was not just a conflict, but rather an eternal and perpetual Kristallnacht.

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A Love for Words

Following our departure from Holland, England beckoned as our next destination. Much like Jeddah and Riyadh held a gravitational pull within the Islamic world, London had become the pulsating heart of my international odyssey. At that time, there was a prevailing notion that London presented a haven for unrestrained and candid conversations, a stark contrast to the confining ambiance in the Islamic world. From the balanced and democracy-loving Muslim Brotherhood leaders to the impassioned youth of Hizb ut-Tahrir, all regarded British university campuses as fertile grounds for their spirited debates.

As I found myself in a contemplative mood, I pondered the idea of savoring the journey to London by bus this time. This would not only allow me to indulge in the scenic English countryside, but also offer a richer, more immersive experience during my travels.

Leaving Den Haag, our bus traversed the borders of Belgium and France, eventually reaching the coastal shores by evening where a ship awaited us. As I stepped out of the immigration line, my eyes landed on Dr. Haeri, who was approaching me. His sudden appearance took me by surprise. I discovered that he was on his way back to London with his colleagues after participating in a conference in Budapest.

I first encountered Dr. Haeri at an anti-war conference in London several years prior, where he was overseeing a booth for the World Passport. With a modest investment of ten pounds, one could become a citizen of the forthcoming global government. When Garry Davis, the founder of the concept of global citizenship, first introduced the idea and its corresponding passport, many people ridiculed it. Nevertheless, Davis remained steadfast and pursued his work. Arthur Koenig, who eventually produced a documentary about Davis's life, offered an intriguing perspective on the matter. Koenig argued that

while the World Passport may seem ludicrous in retrospect, the same could be said for all passports. (After all, where did humans obtain the authority to limit the movement of their fellow beings on God's Earth?) Koenig further noted that their passport serves as a mockery of us, while our passports represent a rebuke to their system.

We have a friend, Professor Glen Martin, who has also set up a transient global parliament with sessions held from time to time in different cities around the world. Once, I had the opportunity to attend a session in Nainital. Citizens of the future from all over the world had gathered there. On this occasion, a new global currency, the Earth Dollar, was to be launched. There was extraordinary enthusiasm among the participants. Then, amidst tight security and formality, a few small iron boxes were brought into the hall with such grandeur that it created a stir in the assembly. As the currency of the future was handed over to the participants one by one and registered in the ledgers of the future global government after our signatures were taken, the delight of the parliament's treasurer, Eugene Almond, was worth seeing. It seemed as if the establishment of the future global government was just moments away. Whenever I met Dr. Haeri, I felt strongly that there was still a possibility of escaping the capitalist stranglehold, and that many noble souls had not yet accepted defeat at the hands of the oppressive system..

The ship's lower deck was a bustling hub of activity, adorned with a medley of eateries and snack shops. For children, a variety of games and play equipment were available, and the discordant music of the carousel echoed, creating an atmosphere akin to a lively fair. In contrast, the upper deck emanated tranquility, serving as our chosen meeting place. Once everyone found their seats, the allure of a stroll on the ship's deck was too tempting to resist - after all, the authentic delight of the sea can only be savored from that vantage point.

The deck was sparsely populated with enthusiasts. In a semi-shadowed corner, I found a bench, claimed it, and immersed myself in the evening prayers. Above was the boundless, open sky; below, the tumultuous symphony of the waves; and all around, the biting slaps of

the frigid winds. In the face of the formidable and enigmatic vastness of the sea, our ship seemed minuscule and inconsequential. Lost in these mesmerizing views, I drifted into a light slumber.

Upon awakening, I noticed my father seated on the opposite side of the bench, his back towards me. He was propped on his right hand, chin resting on his palm, seemingly engrossed in deep thought. Abruptly, his lips began to utter the prayer, "Ya Musabib ul Asbab." 'O Sustainer! Save this teetering ship, for the storm surrounds us and we have no refuge but You; no one else is ours.' Amid his fervent pleas, the repeated chants of "Min Dhurriyati, Min Dhurriyati" (For my progeny, for my progeny) resonated, jolting me into full consciousness.

Witnessing my father in such an agitated and tormented state stirred a wave of unease within me. I was left guessing about the potential catastrophe his demeanor might be hinting at. Regardless of whether it was in the realm of dreams or the domain of reality, Aba had always been my shelter in the storm, my steadfast sentinel in times of trouble. Even after his departure from this world, this comforting constancy never dwindled.

During one instance, as we were amidst refurbishing our house, a collection of old files brimming with miscellaneous papers and correspondences was on the brink of disposal. It was at this very juncture that my father made an unforeseen intervention, advising us, "Do not discard these files." A meticulous examination revealed that these files were repositories of crucial documents and correspondences with eminent individuals. Thanks to my father's timely intervention, these priceless historical records were rescued from potential oblivion.

My father possessed a unique talent for weaving the palpable reality with the surreal world of dreams. He encouraged us to envision dreams in our wakeful state, thereby fascinatingly dissolving the boundary between sleep and wakefulness. I recall a time when I accompanied him on a leisurely sojourn to the mesmerizing shoreline of the Red Sea in Jeddah after completing the Hajj. He devoted a

substantial amount of time wholly immersed in the hypnotic display of the sea waves. Upon inquiry, he confessed that he had only ever experienced such scenes in the realm of his dreams, making this his first encounter with such grandeur in the tangible world.

Dreams played an influential part in my father's life. Intriguingly, through these otherworldly dreams, he established a unique, metaphysical bridge into our own lives.

Not long after, our bus embarked from the coast of Dover, with our journey to London still ahead of us. Procuring a hot cup of coffee from a local shop, I also picked up the most recent edition of the British newspaper, The Guardian. Settling into my seat on the bus, I planned to relish my coffee while perusing the news. As I began scanning through the headlines, it dawned on me that my father's anxiety was not unfounded. The precarious circumstances confronting Indian Muslims back in our homeland were already deeply troubling. Now, the situation was compounded by the Iraqi military's aggression towards Kuwait, leading to an atmosphere of unpredictability engulfing the entire Middle East.

I had been mulling over the idea of convening a national convention focused on the issues facing Indian Muslims for a few days. However, with the escalating complexities in the Gulf, it became clear that international crises could not be divorced from our national discourse.

During that time, my lodgings in London were with Sheikh Abdul Khaliq, a man of extraordinary virtues. His piety and fear of God were unparalleled, housing within him a restless spirit that was always on the quest for paths leading to the triumph of truth. He had shared company with leading scholars across the Arab world and beyond, yet he never found himself fully subscribing to any particular belief system. Perhaps it was this trait that formed the foundation of our friendship.

One day, he remarked, "The rigid Hanafism of Indian scholars, their ossified traditionalist way of thinking, holds them back from making a

fresh start. In this matter, the Saudi and Ikhwani scholars are far ahead of us. The way we have made the Hanafi interpretation of absolute obedience a fixed center of religion and are unwilling to entertain alternative interpretations, solely for the fear of losing our unity, is not a good omen."

"And now," he continued, "there are talks about the 'Arsh se Farsh'—from the ground to the sky—regarding mosques. This sentiment stems from the ongoing Babri Masjid dispute, where the Muslim side has claimed that once a mosque, always a mosque, from earth to sky, the physical space of a mosque is inviolable and cannot be shifted. Let's see what becomes of this stance."

He was, indeed, a free thinker. His words, always wrapped in the robe of wisdom, had a way of echoing long after they were spoken, resonating within the corridors of my mind, prompting me to explore newer perspectives and ideas.

Absolutely! There were days when the Muslim Personal Law Board was incessantly issuing proclamations, such as "Once a mosque is established, that very place remains consecrated from the earth to the sky, forever in perpetuity." During that time, I had penned numerous correspondences to the president of the board, articulating that within the Hanafi school of thought, there isn't a rigid dictum which insists that a mosque's geographical footprint, from the terrestrial sphere to the celestial expanse, remains a mosque until the end of time. Imam Muhammad, another student of Imam Abu Hanifa, even proposes that should a mosque or its associated facilities fall into ruin for any reason, there is no impediment to transferring them to another locale. Thus, what were the foundational principles upon which this assertion of a mosque extending 'from earth to sky' was being articulated? However, even amidst this discourse, my remarks were brushed aside, left unattended in the rush of prevailing narratives.

He countered, "In this heated climate, who will pay heed to your words, especially when the battle cries are already echoing from both ends? The chant of 'Har Har Mahadev' seems to be met only by the

equally resonant claim of a mosque 'from earth to sky.' However, there's a whisper on the winds that Maulana Ali Miyan and the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram are in the midst of a dialogue, facilitated by the government. Wouldn't it be a remarkable feat if this dialogue could pioneer a path of mutual comprehension and conciliation?"

"Certainly, Maulana Ali Miyan is in an influential position right now, one that could significantly sway the situation," I agreed, "The government comprehends his power. He's had personal ties with numerous prime ministers, most notably Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. In fact, following her political defeat during the Emergency, Indira even sought his blessings. The unfolding dialogue with the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram seems to be under the guidance of Prime Minister V.P. Singh. Given this context, Maulana's significance in the current landscape is undisputed. However, his gentle and reserved persona may not be capable of taking a definitive stance on such a complex issue based purely on his own perspectives."

"Why do you think so?" they asked.

"Well, from what I understand, Maulana's temperament is not confrontational. It won't be easy for him to challenge the leaders of the Babri Masjid and assert his position. Some people have personalities that are more rounded, without sharp edges. They tend to avoid making enemies, which can be both a strength and a weakness. Such individuals don't typically change the course of history; instead, they focus on maintaining the status quo. Moreover, Maulana is a man of writing and speaking. Nations' fortunes aren't shaped by a love for speech or 'hubbe kalam.'"

"'Hubbe Kalam'?" Sheikh Abdul Khaliq asked for clarification.

"In Mecca, we have a friend named Muhammad Nasser. He is a highly educated and distinguished scholar, as well as the editor of the English journal Rabita. Once, he asked Maulana why he regularly attended Rabita's programs and actively participated, even though these

gatherings didn't seem to bring about any significant change in the condition of the Ummah. According to Muhammad Nasser, Maulana replied, 'Oh, brother! A love for speech, or 'hubbe kalam,' is also a thing.'"

"At this time, the Ummah needs courage to express itself, not a love for speech," Sheikh Abdul Khaliq said.

Both of us admired Maulana. His honesty and piety had a profound impact on our hearts and minds. However, we couldn't comprehend why, despite his frequent presence in the highest echelons of government, he didn't adopt a strong and resolute stance on Muslim issues. He had public support and was respected by everyone from Indira Gandhi to Rajiv Gandhi and Prime Minister VP Singh. It was also challenging for me to understand why, after the massacre of Muslims in Moradabad, he didn't make any concerted effort to seek legal recourse or console the helpless Muslims during his visit to the city. Instead, he focused all his attention on the conference on the message of humanity, Payame Insaniat, in Lucknow the following month. After Moradabad, Muslims were targeted in Nellie, followed by the harrowing incidents in Hashimpura and Maliana, and then the attempt to evict Muslims from Bhagalpur. All of this occurred under the government's watch, and ironically, after all these incidents, helpless Muslims were ensnared in false cases. The criminals remained free. If our leadership had adopted a firm stance after these events or pursued legal action against the criminals in an organized and strategic manner, perhaps it would not have been so easy for them to incite one 'disturbance' after another. Then, why did our national leadership consider only rallies, speeches, statements, and meetings with the Prime Minister to be sufficient? The more I pondered, the more this unresolved conundrum baffled me.

Years passed since those incidents took place. In the meantime, various volumes of Maulana Ali Miyan's autobiography, Caravan-e-Zindagi, were published. In these volumes, Maulana discussed his visit to Moradabad and mentioned organizing the Payame Insaniat Convention in Lucknow as a means to address the situation. He

acknowledged that the convention gave him a chance to raise his soft voice and candidly expressed that he couldn't do more within his limitations.

Maulana wrote about his interactions and correspondence with Indira Gandhi, recounting her visit to his house in Raebareli on the second day of Eid to meet him and the women of the household to pay her respects (Vol. 2, p. 228). He also found it necessary to discuss his 'informal' and 'frequent' meetings with Rajiv Gandhi, praising his 'gentlemanly conduct,' 'truthfulness,' and 'moral courage' (Vol. 5, p. 33).

However, for the sake of accuracy, Maulana clarified that "after the Bhagalpur riots, Muslim sentiments were so agitated that it became difficult to speak in support of the Congress party even in private gatherings. As a result, I myself was no longer as steadfast in supporting the government as it generally was for Congress governments" (Vol. 4, p. 149).

A possible reason for this could be that after the riots, Rajiv Gandhi visited Bihar, and instead of punishing the culpable police officers, he reinstated the accused and dismissed officers. As per Maulana Ali Mian, the news of this action spread within the state and beyond, heightening the Muslims' awareness of the central government's negligence and indifference (Volume 4, p.148). Even as I perused these volumes, the unresolved puzzle for me remained: why is Maulana so convinced of the "moral courage" and "noble conduct" of those prime ministers whose hands were stained with the blood of Muslims and whose acts of cruelty and heartlessness were documented by Maulana himself in his book? Why does he present his interactions and relationship with these oppressors with such importance?

51

The Round Corner

One day, in the basement of the SOAS library, where there is an extensive collection of books on Jewish legal, social, and political movements, I encountered a young Jewish scholar. As our conversation unfolded, I learned that his name is Zakari, and he is working on a research paper about Jewish leadership during the Nazi era. To continue the conversation, I asked if there was a specific leader or author central to his research or if he was merely examining the general state of affairs during that period. He replied, "Yes! There is a man named Steven Wise, but you might not be familiar with him."

Indeed, who wouldn't be familiar with Wise (intelligent)? After all, we constantly seek wisdom and intellect. Our Prophet said, "Wisdom is the lost property of the believer; wherever he finds it, he has the greatest right to it." The history of the Holocaust, or Shoah, cannot be complete without a mention of Steven Wise. He was highly influential in his time, and even President Roosevelt held him in great esteem.

Upon hearing the word Shoah (the Hebrew term for the Holocaust) from me and learning about my familiarity with Steven Wise, a mix of delight and surprise appeared on Zakari's face. Our conversation concluded with an exchange of smiles.

The next day, I spotted Zakari in line at the cafeteria. I thought to myself, since Zakari is writing about Jewish leadership, why not try to learn from him how different their leadership is from ours? I also recalled a video about Kristallnacht where I had heard a rabbi vehemently questioning where the Jewish leadership was when the Holocaust was happening in Germany and the occupied territories. What were their organizations doing? Before I could inquire, Zakari himself mentioned that he plans to travel to New York next week to study documents related to Steven Wise. I asked: Jewish leadership in America was quite influential at the time, so why couldn't they help

their fellow Jews against the Nazis? My question made him suddenly serious. He replied: I have to examine some unpublished letters written by Steven Wise to other Jewish leaders and some government officials of that era, which are occasionally referenced. In my opinion, it was our leadership that actually let us down. If our leaders, whether in Germany or America, hadn't adopted a cowardly and indifferent attitude, the massacre of six million Jews wouldn't have happened so easily.

So, you also hold your leaders accountable? He replied: Look, some things are quite evident. What happened in Germany didn't occur in just one day. From 1933, when Hitler came to power, until 1944, when Jews trapped in concentration camps began to be liberated by the Allies' bombardment, the destruction of Jews was systematically planned and executed over a period of eleven years. The question naturally arises: what were the influential Jewish leaders in Europe and America doing when this calamity was befalling us?

So, do you think that the Jewish leaders were secretly colluding with the Nazis? At my question, he became slightly irritated and said, "I can't say that for certain. Complex questions shouldn't be asked in such an overly simplistic manner. Sometimes, situations arise where your self-interest and cowardice turn into weapons for your enemies. What you call self-interest is actually a behavior based on appeasement. In my opinion, the Jewish leadership during the Nazi era suffered from this issue. Now, take Stephen Wise himself; he was the most prominent religious leader of that era. The chairmanship of all the major Jewish associations in America was upheld due to his influence. His level of involvement in the corridors of power was such that President Roosevelt casually addressed him as 'Stephen.' It is said that he had met with President Roosevelt thirteen times. Because of their personal interactions, a common joke at that time was that there are only two worlds for ordinary people: one, die velt, meaning the present world, and the other, yene velt, meaning the hereafter. However, for Jews, there is an additional alternative, and that is Roosevelt."

Excellent! It involuntarily slipped from my tongue. He articulated: Nevertheless, the extraordinary reliance on Roosevelt yielded no fruit for the Jews, not in this world nor in the afterlife. They fell prey to this third alternate scenario. In this context, the burden of responsibility becomes significantly heavier for Stephen Wise and other leaders of that era. During the fragile times of the Holocaust, Rabbi Stephen Wise had personal and casual interactions with the President of the United States. They met frequently. Then, why couldn't he persuade President Roosevelt to undertake some impactful action? I questioned. He answered: Some individuals inherently possess a penchant for compromise, or let's say, they lack a backbone. They are incapable of adopting a firm and decisive stance on any issue. They understand that their leadership influence in the governmental sphere is tied to their personal reverence. To them, it becomes critical whether the President or Prime Minister invited them specially, sought their opinion on a matter, or personally visited them. They fear that by taking a decisive stance, they might lose the admiration of the rulers and, in turn, the faint remaining hope of welfare might also fade away. The rulers, too, comprehend this point well; as long as these leaders exist, they need not do more than offering verbal commitments and demonstrating courteous behavior. The outcome is that our resistance's stronghold crumbles bit by bit, and each time, these spineless leaders keep presenting their new narrative of victimhood in the halls of power.

'What indeed is the reason that they fail to comprehend the downfall of these fortresses of resistance?'

He responded: When despair from God and expectations from human beings find a home in someone's heart, they opt for the path of capitulation over perseverance. Take, for instance, Rabbi Stephen Wise. He was filled with pride knowing that President Roosevelt had extended a dinner invitation to his daughter and son-in-law. The President himself was present at this occasion, and he even sent me a particularly warm greeting. The recurring thought that haunted him was, 'If only this person would take some influential step for our

people.' Simultaneously, news about the expulsion and mass extermination of Jews from Germany kept flowing in. Instead of initiating any meaningful action, President Roosevelt simply asserted that the sole route to rescue the Jews was by defeating Hitler on the battlefield. The entire Jewish world remained in a state of turmoil. Jews from diverse regions under German occupation were continuously packed into trains and transported to torture camps. The wave of anxiety never ceased among the American Jewish communities. Young Jews, prominently the Bergson Boys, who were quite the talk of the town back then, continually staged protests in New York, Washington, and other cities. However, these demonstrations had no influence on Stephen Wise's personal interactions with the President. In fact, it is even suggested that he barred President Roosevelt from meeting the fervent protesters, fearing that an alternate Jewish leadership might gain legitimacy in America.

'So, are you suggesting they have a round-corner personality?' I asked, chewing on my words.

Initially, he was taken aback by my use of this term. After a moment, he replied: 'Yes, you're exactly right. They wish to represent their people's interests in front of those in power, but with a sense of diplomacy and tact. They fear that their blunt remarks might offend and potentially lose any opportunity for discussion and representation. They do want to speak the truth, but often, the truth gets stuck in their throats. They become concerned that their sharp words might backfire and upset the authorities. From the outside, it appears as if our religious and national leaders are confidently engaging with those in power. However, in reality, issues persist as they are, and with each passing day, their severity only increases.'

'So, in your view, how should leadership have acted?' I queried.

He responded, 'Leadership, in essence, resembles a seesaw game. If you fail to exert your influence, the adversary will invariably deem you as insignificant. After years of engagements, recurrent presentations of

issues, and fervent appeals, once it becomes clear to them that you don't pose a substantial threat, and that creating serious complications contradicts your disposition, why would those wielding power pay heed to your words? The enduring exchanges between naive personalities like Rabbi Stephen Wise and eloquent communicators like Roosevelt, spanning over approximately a decade or more, reinforce the idea that benign national leaders have consistently left their people vulnerable to defeat.'

"But was there any alternative course of action for Rabbi Wise in the era he lived in?" I pushed for a more nuanced view from Zachary.

Responding, he elaborated, "He invested a substantial amount of time in the pursuit of illusory hopes. His private correspondences hint at his skepticism regarding President Roosevelt's actions, but he lacked the audacity to admonish the President directly. When the genocide of Jews commenced in Nazi Germany and it became starkly apparent that Hitler's 'final solution' to the Jewish question entailed their expulsion from Germany and total extermination, Rabbi Wise was among the first in the United States to receive this chilling information. He sought counsel from officials in the US Department of State, who advised him to withhold this information from the public until the government could independently corroborate it. Rabbi Wise adhered to this advice and maintained a two-month silence on the matter until the news spontaneously erupted in the American media one day, subsequently being confirmed by the relevant government agency. It's argued that had Rabbi Wise raised an alarm in the media two months prior, the world could have become cognizant of this looming threat earlier, potentially saving numerous Jewish lives."

"But wasn't Wise merely acting based on hope? He must have thought that by considering the interests of American leaders, he could make it easier to secure their support," I countered.

Zachary replied emphatically, "That's exactly what I refer to as the 'seesaw game'. If you choose to bury news of significant national and religious concern simply to avoid displeasing the current authorities,

then you're not only ill-suited for this game, but due to your fleeting personality, you also become a national transgressor. Yes, a national transgressor!" Zachary's tone was charged as he continued, "I don't perceive Rabbi Wise as an evil man, but surely someone must be held accountable for such an enormous tragedy, right?"

"Your point is understandable, but resorting to such harsh language for revered religious figures seems inappropriate. We should at least show some respect for their sanctity," I attempted to moderate Zachary's stance.

However, Zachary was unmoved. He retorted, "Sanctity? It's a self-created illusion. We often perceive certain individuals within a halo of spirituality, but fail to rationally justify what exactly confers them with such sanctity. Does a specific mode of attire or a particular demeanor impart spiritual characteristics to an individual, or are there different benchmarks for piety? Our Talmudic narratives abound with valuable lessons. There's a tale of a man who, after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, visited a Rabbi. He said, 'Master! I've traversed extensively in Canaan. I ventured near the Wailing Wall and visited all sacred places, yet I didn't experience any semblance of sanctity or spirituality.' On hearing this, the Rabbi questioned him, 'Are you by any chance buffoffstick?'

'What does that mean?'

'Respond directly to my question. Are you buffoffstick?' The Rabbi reiterated with emphasis.

'I have no clue what you're referring to.'

'Then you're equally clueless about what sanctity and spirituality are. How can you expect to identify them without having a clear understanding of their meaning?'"

As Zachary spun this parable, a faint, knowing smile graced his features. He opined, "A significant number of individuals adopt a

mindset akin to devotees or adherents. They mistake a certain disposition for spiritual elevation and find it challenging to critique people who mirror their own reflections. Upon my reflections, I have reached a conclusion that the atrocities of the Holocaust can be attributed more to our own leaders and our communities than to our adversaries. If Jewish leaders seated in Europe and America, as well as various Jewish societies operating under German jurisdiction, hadn't made themselves into facile targets, the catastrophic massacre of our populace wouldn't have been of such colossal magnitude. I grapple with understanding what transpired with our forefathers that they relinquished their homes and businesses without substantial resistance, opting for the squalor of ghettos. Then, from these ghettos, they willingly embarked on trains, standing ready to transport them to an array of torture chambers. The meticulous organization and systematic efficiency observed in this exodus were likewise facilitated by Jewish leadership at sundry levels. When a nation willingly walks towards torture camps, cognizant that their destination is death, who could potentially rescue such a nation from its grim fate? I'm often labeled an 'internalist', but the more I deliberate on the Holocaust, the more I perceive our leaders' hands drenched in the blood of our own people."

"Your argument is quite unique. Are you suggesting that this in any way reduces the atrocities committed by the Nazis?" I attempted to moderate the fervor of Zachary's claims.

He retorted, "Absolutely not. The atrocities committed by the Nazis are undeniably heinous and cannot be downplayed. What I am proposing is that accomplices to our mass slaughter were found within our own community. The Nazis established a council of Jewish elders in each city, who implemented their edicts with alarming dedication. Some individuals perpetrated unfathomable acts of betrayal against our own people. You may have heard of the Eichmann trial, haven't you?"

"Actually, I wasn't aware of that," I admitted, displaying my lack of knowledge.

He proceeded to explain, "Adolf Eichmann was a high-ranking Nazi officer whose task was to organize the logistics of mass deportations of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps during the Holocaust. He was eventually captured in Argentina, extradited to Israel, and put on trial, which garnered significant media attention at the time. However, my point of contention here isn't specifically with Eichmann. He was just a cog in the machine, merely carrying out orders.

In Hungary, there was a notable Jewish leader by the name of Rudolf Kastner. He had established a relief committee in Budapest with the aim of helping Jews escape from areas under Nazi control. In a clandestine agreement with Eichmann, Kastner managed to negotiate the safety of a group of select Jews, including several distinguished Jewish artists, poets, and writers. The agreement stipulated that a convoy of 1600 Jews would be transported by train from Hungary to the safety of Switzerland.

Kastner, due to his regular interactions with Eichmann, was fully aware of the horrifying reality that the trains deporting Jews from various areas under German occupation were in fact part of a systematic plan of mass extermination. However, in order to save those 1600 lives and ensure their safe passage to Switzerland, he made the difficult decision to withhold this critical information from the larger Jewish community. The consequence of this decision was twofold: while it ensured the survival of a small group of people, it inadvertently led to the deaths of countless others, who were unaware of their impending doom.

This situation mirrors the actions of Rabbi Weiss, who, for two months, suppressed the news of our mass extermination. Just like Kastner, Weiss made a hard choice to save a select few at the cost of many. Both of them undoubtedly had their justifications, but it's undeniable that the hands of those in leadership positions were not entirely clean of our blood."

"You're placing Kastner and Weiss in the same category?" My objection sparked a smile on his face.

In response, he said, "Kastner, comparatively, is a lesser offender, and the nature of his crime is well known to everyone. He faced a public trial in Israel, during which the judge concluded that he had been acting under the devil's sway. He was charged with assuming a role that should be reserved for the divine – deciding who should live and who should die. Only those who received his personal approval were allowed on the train to survival. For such a crime, Kastner was deemed deserving of capital punishment.

Contrastingly, the veneer of sanctity still masks Rabbi Weiss's transgressions. His decisions, which inadvertently led to the demise of many Jews, remain shrouded in an aura of holiness due to his religious standing. As a result, the true extent of his transgressions remains underplayed, even today."

As our lunch break drew to a close, the cacophony of dishes being collected and chairs rearranged began to swell in the café. I excused myself from Zakariyya's company, returning to my solitary perch within the library. Yet my thoughts remained far from my studies. I found myself reminiscing on a conversation with Hashim Ali Akhtar. He had shared a tale of the systemic injustices faced by a Muslim bureaucrat, suggesting that the formation of Pakistan might have been an inevitable response to such prejudice. "Let's put this narrative aside," he had proposed, "Jinnah might have addressed the predicament of half the Muslims in the subcontinent, now it's up to us to tackle the issues faced by the remaining half." His words had then struck me with the force of an atomic explosion. Today, upon hearing the story of Rudolf Kastner's rescue train, it felt as if our own leaders may have made a similar sacrifice. It was as if they too had offered up half of the subcontinent's Muslim population, ensuring the survival and safety of a select few at the cost of the many.

The more I reflected on it, Rabbi Weiss's personality appeared somewhat familiar and emblematic. It was as if numerous images were fitting into this frame, one after another. Some of these images were ones I had encountered up close, while others were based on distant glimpses. I then began to wonder what connection our scholars and

leaders could have with the journey of a Jewish cleric. In light of this thought, I told myself that any similarity between Rabbi Weiss and our religious scholars might merely be a devil's whisper, and I found solace in dismissing the notion.

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A Rebellious Cry

In London, the opportunities I had for research and observation made me yearn for an even more extended experience. However, the news coming from India remained worrisome. One day, I found myself engaged in a conversation about this issue with Sheikh Abdul Khaliq. He said, "The leadership of Indian Muslims is utterly oblivious to the current circumstances. If only they recognized that they are presently confronting a global onslaught. Just last year, the World Hindu Summit took place in Milton Keynes, situated in the outskirts of London. The Ram Mandir movement was the driving force behind it. About a hundred thousand people from various regions and corners had gathered. The atmosphere resonated with songs like 'Hindu awakens, the world awakens, Manu's system awakens' (हिंदू जागे विश्व जागे, मानव का विश्वास जागे). It seemed as though the Ram Mandir movement had spurred Hindus on for a global resurgence. Conversely, when observing the leaders of the Babri Masjid and the heads of Muslim organizations, it appears as though they are:

Untrained leader of the troops, with shattered lines at strife, Alas, that half-drawn arrow aimed, with no clear target in life.

He said, "Battles cannot be won with mere newspaper statements. Indian Muslims need not 'Mogiyana' (woman-like) leadership but prophetic resolve."

At first, I laughed upon hearing the term "Mogiyana" from Sheikh's mouth, a purely rustic expression. Then I thought, perhaps he meant "Maulviana" or clerical. When I asked for clarification, he replied, "Why should only the Maulvis be held responsible? In a way, we are all victims of the same weakness. And until there is a definitive cure for this chronic ailment, the mindset of a troubled person will continue to dominate every plan and strategy for action."

I thought to myself, perhaps Sheikh was right. If a nation's psychological and spiritual health is not sound, even with a population of two hundred million believers, it feels as if it is merely a "minority." Instead of guiding people towards the message of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), their scholars find it more appropriate to take refuge in pre-prophetic examples like "Hilf al-Fudul." Their intellectuals consider themselves Muslims but are hesitant to admit it, fearing that the revelation of their ideological identity might lead to accusations of sectarianism. The image of Islam as the national religion of Muslims is so popular and widespread that the voice of prophetic Islam has been overshadowed. When the scholarly class has limited their efforts to the pre-prophetic example of "Hilf al-Fudul," how can one blame the common people?

When disbelief rises from the Kaaba, where will Islam find its place?

Today, I found myself recalling the national convention of Indian Muslims that took place last year at Maulankar Hall, under the auspices of Syed Shahabuddin. For that gathering, I had brought along a copy of the Holy Quran. I started my address by waving the Quran before the audience and declared, "Folks, I am here to pull you into the political vortex this book represents. We, as Muslims, have already been through the ringer thanks to our own nationalist struggle. We've lost our grip on the historical claim to the erstwhile Darul Islam, India, in this endless game of Hindu versus Muslim. Now, this nationalistic strife, resurrected in the form of the Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, aspires to entangle us once again in an outright ethnic war. The demand of the hour is not to assert our constitutional and democratic rights, but to disseminate the universal message of Islam, which assures the rights of all nations. The ethos of justice and equity in Islam can still serve as an uplifting anthem for a considerable non-Muslim population in this country.

The battles of Mandal and Kamandal have once again underscored the reality that we have been coerced into accepting a minority status in the face of an engineered majority. The Islamic agenda of honoring human dignity can still herald a new dawn in this country." As I said

this, I raised the Quran once again in my hands, saying, "The time has come to initiate the politics emanating from this book in this country."

My act of brandishing the Quran elicited a flurry of reactions amongst the audience, who listened to my speech with rapt attention and evident interest. At the closure of the meeting, Syed Shahabuddin, in his presidential speech, offered a pointed critique of those individuals who, according to him, had attended the convention under the impression that it was a call to establish an Islamic government. He made it abundantly clear through various points in his address that his objective was not a novel political strategy, but rather the defense of the prevailing secular order. And with that, the matter was settled.

Syed Shahabuddin held me in high regard. Our relationship was defined by a constant exchange of ideas, and it was probably this connection that led him to invite me to his convention. However, I must admit, I failed to fully appreciate the delicacy of the situation. The incident marked a significant shift in our interactions that has persisted since.

A couple of years later, fate brought us together again on a stage. The event was the inaugural convention of the American Federation of Muslims from India (AFMI) in New York. Shahabuddin, having traveled from India, was in attendance. I was in Washington at the time, and the organizers, seizing the opportunity of my presence, invited me as well. Once again, Shahabuddin spoke in defense of the secular order, while I continued to spotlight the system's 'darkness beneath the luminous façade'.

Years later, when I heard Maulvi Mahmood Madni, the secretary of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, rather proudly proclaim that they (i.e., his patriotic colleagues) had rejected the Nizam-e-Mustafa (System of the Prophet) in favor of the prevailing secular system, I was not surprised. Rather, I was touched by their candid admission. Their audacity to reject religious authority further reinforced my belief that the Indian Muslims have been grappling with an ideological and political contradiction ever since the partition of India.

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The Third Migration

There was a unique kind of wanderlust brewing within me during my time in Aligarh. In recent years, it had become something of a habit, an almost intrinsic part of my lifestyle, to embark on a new journey just as the dust of the previous one was settling. The continuous travels were so constant that some acquaintances started to quip that I practically lived on airplanes, visiting Aligarh only occasionally, as if on a fleeting whim.

On this particular occasion, after an unusually extended period of absence, when I returned to Aligarh, I found my collection of books and assorted documents had been entrusted to various friends and scattered across their rooms.

A stack of the book "Ghulba-e-Islam" had found its way to one of these friends who was now regularly faced with a barrage of questions from visitors. They would curiously inquire, 'What is this book?', 'Why is there such a large collection of it here?' and 'What is so special about this book?' The remarkable thing about this friend was his ability to placate these queries with eloquent responses, all without having read a single page of the book himself.

In the initial few days, I grappled with a peculiar feeling of homelessness. Yet, the warm hospitality of my friends quickly turned this into an illusion of having numerous rooms at my disposal. I realized I had unnecessarily confined myself to a single room. One day, as I was engrossed in the morning newspaper on the veranda, a familiar elderly figure emerged from a neighboring room. Much to my surprise, it was Maulana Hameedullah, an old acquaintance from my time in Medina. He had recently returned from Riyadh. Through our conversation, he painted a grim picture of Saudi Arabia, a country gripped by fear and uncertainty in the wake of Saddam's invasion of

Kuwait, marked by deserted highways, silent airports, and a looming sense of the unknown.

Witnessing people fleeing their homes in terror, I considered visiting Riyadh to experience this unusual situation firsthand. All my work essentials, documents, and even academic research notes were packed away in various cartons. My only companion was this humble bag that accompanied me on all my journeys. Given the nomadic lifestyle I had adopted, I thought, why not steer towards this desert where the faithful were gathering for a new confrontation? Interestingly, a conference organized by the Muslim World League was being held during this time. Unwilling to join the mass rallying in Mecca to unconditionally support Saudi Arabia's stance, I accepted the conference visa, yet retained the personal nature of my journey.

I had some urgent tasks to handle in Karachi. The publication of "Hand Book of the Islamic Revival" was nearing completion, with Muhammad Salahuddin, the editor of Takbeer, overseeing its launch. The PIA flight from Delhi landed in the morning and left for Jeddah late at night. Upon leaving the airport, I thought it would be more convenient to stay in the city center. I had previously lodged at the YMCA, conveniently situated opposite the PIA office. After freshening up, I found myself instinctively heading towards the PIA office. I wondered if my ticket could be extended by a day, allowing me to meet my dear Uncle Jilani - a longing that remained unfulfilled during my last visit. The lady at the counter, upon seeing my Indian passport, exhibited extraordinary courtesy and confirmed a seat for me on the next day's flight.

I was in possession of an address in the Federal B Area. As our journey progressed, our taxi traversed through Liaquat Abad, a location adorned with life-size cutouts and billboards of Altaf Hussain. I queried my driver, "Why are there portraits and slogans of Altaf Hussain displayed ubiquitously?" He responded, somewhat surprised, "Aren't you aware? This is the city of the Quaid."

"I am certainly aware that the mausoleum of the Quaid is situated in this city," I responded. His answer followed, "Are you speaking of Quaid-e-Azam? His epoch is bygone; now, it's the era of the Quaid-e-Inquilab." "So, have you people now substituted your leader?" I questioned further. He retorted, "What option do we have? We relinquished our homes for the sake of Pakistan. We gave up ancestral estates and settled in the austere landscape of Lalu Khet. Four decades and six years have passed since then. A whole generation has sprouted and blossomed here, but we are still struggling to assimilate into this soil. Our offspring are still labeled as Muhajir." "That's a badge of honor. 'Muhajir' is indeed a potent term," I pointed out. This seemed to kindle his emotions. He argued, "That's precisely our point. Acknowledge us as a nation, akin to the Baloch, Sindhi, Punjabi, and Pashtuns, so we are not perceived as aliens in Pakistan." "But the Muhajirs are an integral part of Pakistan. They have assumed a foundational role. It's not just that they deserted their homes to relocate to Pakistan, but the areas they came from, the minority Muslim regions, were the strongest bastions of the Pakistan Movement. Why then would you want to forsake such a historic leadership role and confine yourselves to merely being recognized as Sindhi, Balochi, or Punjabi?" I questioned.

He responded, "All these are merely intellectual discourses. Are you by any chance a journalist? We have a similar character here, Salahuddin. He engages in such types of conversations. Despite being a Muhajir himself, he pens words against Muhajirs. Quite a peculiar person, indeed. Are you aware that at this moment, millions of Bihari Muslims are stranded in camps across Bangladesh? If their affiliations were with the Baloch, Sindhi, Punjabi, or Pashtun ethnic groups, would they still be languishing in these asylum camps? Each of these ethnicities have their own provinces, right? Had the Muhajirs also possessed a dedicated province in Pakistan, the issue of Bihari Muslims marooned in Bangladesh would have been resolved a long time ago."

We had now entered the Federal B Area in our taxi. The streets were broad, and the houses were numbered, making it relatively easy to locate the desired address. I bid farewell to the taxi driver. In front of me was a spacious, bungalow-style house. I rang the bell, and a doorkeeper opened the door. Upon hearing that a visitor from India had arrived, a flurry of excitement swept through the house. An elderly lady, accompanied by two or three of her daughters, graciously welcomed me. The girls informed me that their grandfather no longer resided here; he had left this house a few days prior. However, they assured me that their father had been informed of my arrival over the phone. During this time, girls from neighbouring houses, presumably friends of these young women, also gathered to see their newly-arrived brother from India. One unique thing I noticed among these girls was a distinctive blush on their cheeks. I wasn't sure if it was the blush of shyness or a gift of natural beauty. Later, I discovered that it was a special type of rouge, a fashion trend prevalent in Karachi at that time. Despite the sisters insisting that I stay, I was eager to meet Uncle Jilani. Upon my persistence, a gentleman brought a motorcycle, and I, accompanying him, navigated through various narrow lanes to reach a mosque situated in a congested area, where Uncle Jilani had taken up residence in an outer corner. Seeing me so unexpectedly, he was greatly surprised. He inquired about my father's well-being for a long time. He insisted that I must stay with him for at least one night so that we could have a comprehensive conversation.

I swept a quick, appraising gaze around his room, every corner of which seemed cluttered with a haphazard collection of objects. The room housed a solitary bed, which Uncle Jilani insisted I occupy for sleeping, while he contented himself with a mat spread out on the floor. At three o'clock in the morning, I was roused from sleep by a sound. Upon opening my eyes, I found that Uncle Jilani had just completed his Tahajjud prayer. He kindled the stove, brewed some tea, and as he proffered a cup to me, he began to speak, "What can I do? I'm a creature of habit, a slave to my routines. Wherever I go, I somehow manage to accumulate a world of belongings around me. Look at how much stuff has piled up in this room, as if I am destined

to reside here till eternity. I wonder if there's another worldly creature like me." His voice wavered as he spoke. It seemed to me that he might be wrestling with a sense of disenchantment, for the very cup in which he served me tea had a broken handle. Amid these few chipped cups, a rusted stove, several clothes hanging from hooks, a small table upon which a Holy Quran and a few books were meticulously arranged, and under the guise of furniture, two shaky chairs and a bed. Despite this, there was a lingering impression that this worldly creature had indeed accumulated a considerable amount of material possessions.

I asked, "What circumstances led you to abandon your spacious, comfortable bungalow and inhabit this place of disarray?"

He replied, "My son, the bungalow had become a place of suffocation. At first, there was a sense of satisfaction associated with our material prosperity. However, the shadow of a materialistic lifestyle began to cast over us. A doorkeeper and a guard were appointed. Then came the phase when the desire for wealth and status blinds one's eyes, erasing the distinction between what's lawful and unlawful. I tried to make my son, Saleem, understand that even a slight contamination of illicit wealth in our lawful earnings renders the whole wealth impure. But he didn't listen. Eventually, I made a stern decision. I decided that I would migrate again. Now, I find a great sense of peace in this corner of the mosque. I teach the Quran to children in the evening, and this is enough for me to get by. The rest is in the hands of Allah." As he uttered these words, Uncle's eyes welled up with tears.

"You have experienced multiple migrations in your life, first to East Pakistan, then to Karachi after it became Bangladesh, and now in your old age, you've chosen to live here, away from your family. For how long do you think this is appropriate?"

He said, "Saleem had come to visit; they check on me occasionally. He has assured me that they will avoid dubious sources of income. May God give them the ability to do good deeds. I hope they understand that we didn't come here just for mansions and bungalows. We had

havelis and vast lands back in India as well. We migrated here in the hope of living in a 'Darul Islam,' to live freely as Muslims. If our children's lives are devoid of Islam, then what's the point of such migration?

"You are a double migrant; when you look back, how do you feel? Was the decision to migrate the right one?"

Perhaps he was not prepared for my question. He remained silent for a while, then said, "Our first migration was quite peculiar. We thought we were going to Pakistan, but little did we know that Pakistan itself would depart from there. Just understand that we were deceived, yet there was still a glimmer of hope, so we came here."

Here too, migrants face numerous challenges; some talk about the concept of Sindhudesh, and efforts are being made in that direction: "Sindh mein hoga kaise guzara? Aadha humara, aadha tumhara." (How will things work out in Sindh? Half ours, half yours.)

He said: "We had come to realize in East Pakistan that we, the mohajiroon or the migrants, never truly found ansars or supporters. An entire generation of ours grew up in East Pakistan; our children became fluent in the Bengali language, but they were still referred to as 'Biharis.' Local society never fully accepted them. Here too, they are viewed as a group with roots elsewhere. It seems as if Pakistan is only the homeland for Muslims from majority-Muslim regions, while the Muslims from minority regions, who were at the forefront of this movement and became its vanguard, have only experienced deprivation and helplessness."

"And what about those left behind? Their anguish and grief seem to be never-ending," I interjected as a follow-up to the conversation.

He responded, "Indeed, it's a separate, heart-wrenching tale. Why did all this happen? How did it unfold? No one knows for sure. Circumstances progressed in such a way that people couldn't perceive

the looming danger until it was too late. When they finally awoke to the reality, chaos and displacement were rampant.

Did Muslim scholars and leaders truly not foresee the challenging times that lay ahead for Muslims?

Our scholars and leaders were trapped in their own rhetoric, and the public was enthralled by impassioned speeches. There was limited emphasis on thoughtful analysis and assessment. Revolutions cannot be born from the chaos of unrestrained slogans, but at the time, no one comprehended this."

The words of Jilani Uncle, heavy with the weight of a bygone era's sorrow, lingered in the air. I yearned for the conversation to unravel further, to delve deeper into the stories of the past. However, the pressing obligation to meet the editor of Takbeer loomed before me. With a mix of reluctance and necessity, I bade farewell to Uncle and ventured towards the Namco Center – the beating heart of the weekly publication, Takbeer.

Upon arriving at the YMCA that evening, I was met by two police officers waiting for me. Initially, they briefly examined my passport before suggesting we continue our conversation in a room upstairs. It turned out that I had been wandering around Karachi for two days without the proper visa—a violation of the regulations that I had unknowingly committed. The officers employed various tactics to determine how much money I had on me. Once they realized I was merely a penniless student with only a few hundred rupees and the fifty dollars documented in my passport, their attitudes softened.

One officer remarked to his colleague that it would be pointless to try to take advantage of me. He acknowledged that I was merely attending a conference and did not possess a work visa. Then he turned to me and inquired if I planned to visit Medina after the conference. "Yes, Insha'Allah," I responded. Dismissing all other concerns, he requested that when I arrived in Medina, I deliver his salutations to the Prophet.

"My name is Sadiq Khan. Please don't forget!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet.

As he extended his hand for a parting handshake, a warm smile illuminated his face. His demeanor was now one of respect and reverence, as if my status had transformed into that of a messenger, entrusted with conveying his salutations to the Prophet.

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Gasping for Breath

I arrived a bit late to the emergency session of the Rabita conference. Today marked the final day of the three-day event. Upon entering the conference hall, I found Maulana Ali Mian delivering his Kalma-e-Mandoob, a short speech representing all the delegates. I had heard much about Maulana Ali Mian's Arabic eloquence and captivating oratory. People claimed that even native speakers would be left in awe when he spoke. However, after listening to him live among the Arabs, I wasn't as impressed. I later realized that these claims mostly stemmed from exaggerations by his followers.

A similar situation existed in Aligarh, where a gentleman gained fame for his English proficiency and traveled to England annually to teach English to English people. It later became apparent that the responsibility of presenting the Kalma-e-Mandoob, the words representing all delegates, typically fell to those who unconditionally supported the country's policies.

I had the opportunity to attend an international conference with Prince Salman when he was the governor of Riyadh. I had hoped that during the visit, there would be a chance to exchange thoughts with the governor of Riyadh. However, as per the well-known Saudi tradition, two trusted gentlemen had already been nominated to present the Kalma-e-Mandoob, and they spent the entire time praising the governor. Although Prince Salman repeatedly expressed his desire to learn about outsiders' perspectives and sought advice and suggestions, the traditional format of the Kalma-e-Mandoob left no room for such input. Ultimately, Prince Salman found solace in concluding the meeting.

Today, I saw Sheikh bin Baz dressed in Ihram. He might have completed his Umrah, just like me, and arrived directly at the conference hall. Most of the attendees were unknown to me, but it was

an impressive gathering of influential figures who had come together for this occasion. The formal issuance or launching of the Makkah Declaration was still some time away, so I decided to seize the opportunity and visit the office of my old mentor, Syed Hassan Mutahir Sahib, located on the second floor of the same building.

Syed Sahib took a keen interest in my activities and accomplishments, listened to them with great attention, and consistently offered valuable advice. I had also sent him a booklet about the Muslim militia, which had concerned him. He advised against rushing to conclusions, emphasizing that the situation faced by Indian Muslims required a thorough analysis and evaluation.

I posed a question, asking if Indian Muslims could also assign a name to their great tragedy, just as the Jews refer to their national catastrophe as the Holocaust and the Palestinians call theirs Nakbah. My question startled him, as if he had been struck by a sudden jolt, but he chose to remain silent.

The next day, he encountered me at the Haram. He said, "You have raised a highly relevant question. We should indeed assign a name to this immense tragedy. But how can we do that? First, we must comprehend what has actually transpired. We became migrants, yet migration was not our intent. In our own homeland, where we had resided for centuries, we were labeled as refugees, considered among the besieged, and our homeland was set ablaze. Even those who once wielded great power in this country were reduced to a vulnerable minority. Our language, culture, and the civilization that underpinned our rule in this country were all devastated.

The collapse of a civilization is a deeply painful process. Just as we regard the decline of the Roman Empire, the downfall of the Byzantine throne, and the disintegration of the Ottoman Caliphate as momentous historical events, the fall of Delhi and the ensuing communal partition of the country were no less sorrowful occurrences. However, a proper evaluation of the consequences and ramifications of these events is still pending."

"Tell me, how does it feel to live in independent India?" he probably asked, perhaps intending to provoke me. He then continued, "As for me, it's been a long time since I left India. Besides a youthful romanticism associated with my memories of Aligarh, what else is there?

Living in free India? On the surface, there don't appear to be any problems. However, understand that it feels like something is continuously breaking inside. Someone once asked Jayaprakash Narayan about his experience of this newfound freedom, to which he curtly replied, 'tasteless'. Use that as a basis for your understanding.

Then why don't you consider moving to Britain, like I did?

'Bidding farewell to one's homeland forever is a significant decision. My writings have ignited a spark of hope among people. If I were to abandon the fight, who would step up to confront the persistent challenges there? Besides, my childhood memories are deeply intertwined with these streets and fields.'"

"But isn't life there tasteless?" Not exactly tasteless, maybe that's not the right expression either. Rather, imagine a sense of constriction, an inability to breathe freely, a perpetual sense of living on the edge. It's as though vitality has been drained from life, akin to 'gasping for breath', a state I find myself at a loss to fully articulate.

Fast forward a bit, when due to a severe shortage of oxygen, the country was in the throes of a health crisis with countless lives being claimed by the coronavirus. People were scurrying around in a desperate hunt for oxygen cylinders. Amid this chaos, a famed yoga guru, in a rather callous move, added salt to the wounds of the already distressed citizens by saying, "Who claims there's a deficiency of oxygen in the country? The atmosphere is not lacking in oxygen. The shortfall lies in your frail lungs that are unable to extract an adequate amount of oxygen from the environment." When I heard this, it felt as though the guru had inadvertently cracked my puzzle. This is the exact sensation of suffocation we, as Indian Muslims, have been subjected to

for years. For the past forty-four years, we've been struggling to draw a full breath. Whenever they fancy, they can cut off our oxygen supply, leaving us to flail about like a fish deprived of water. Our lungs don't possess the strength, and constitutional safeguards fall short in providing us with the oxygen - the verve for life.

The End

"Not Dead Yet" delves into the raw and turbulent world of the author's student days, a time marked by events and incidents that unfolded until 1991. This gripping narrative presents not only the author's own story, but also the various voices that shaped that era. Readers will be immersed in a chaotic universe teeming with fragmented, incomplete, and unconventional characters, where they will come face to face with a generation of Indian Muslims who are emotionally scarred, spiritually disoriented, and intellectually adrift.

Unable to fathom the repercussions of the "tushti karan" or appeasement, these individuals grapple with the allegations that the government has been pandering to the Muslim minority. But the consequences of these actions remain elusive. What should this event be called? Where does one even begin to find the words to articulate this incident? As the severity of the situation paralyzes the minds of scholars and intellectuals, and as people struggle to maintain a semblance of stability in their own lives, how can those who are both observers and participants make sense of this mind-numbing tragedy?

After this unfinished, incomplete, and indescribable narrative, please consider:

Nor Alive Either

Which, God willing, will soon be unveiled as a raw and unfiltered sequel to this powerful memoir.

[i] قزاق اجل کا رستے میں جب بھالا مار گراوے گا
دھن، دولت، ناتی، پوتا کیا، اک کنبہ کام نہ آوے گا
سب ٹھاٹھ پڑا رہ جاوے گاجب لاد چلے گا بنجارا
[ii] جب چلتے چلتے رستے میں یہ گون تری رہ جاوے گی
ایک بدھیا تیری مٹی پر پھر گھاس نہ چرنے آوے گی
یہ کھیپ جو تونے لادی ہے سب حصوں میں بٹ جاوے گی
دھی پوت جنوائی بٹیا کیا بنجارن پاس نہ آوے گی۔۔۔ سب ٹھاٹھ پڑا رہ جاوے گا

[iii] تعبیر ہے جس کی حسرت و غم اے ہم نفسو وہ خواب ہیں ہم

[iv] ہوجائے بکھیڑا پاک کہیں پاس اپنے بلالے بہتر ہے
اب درد جدائی سے ان کی اے آہ بہت بیتاب ہیں ہم

[v] لاکھوں ہی مسافر چلتے ہیں منزل پر پہنچتے ہیں دو ایک

[vi] متاع دین و دانش لٹ گئی اللہ والوں کی
[vii]
श्री राधे गोविंदा मन भजले हरि का प्यारा नाम है गो पाला हरि का प्यारा नाम है नंद लाला हरि का प्यारा नाम है श्री राधे गोविंदा मन भजले हरि का प्यारा नाम है
मोर मुकुट सर गुलबन माला केसर तिलक लगाए वृंदावन की कुंज गली में सब को नाच नचाए सब को नाच नचाए मन भजले हरि का प्यारा नाम है श्री राधे गोविंदा

[viii] یا رسولِ خدا آسرا دیجئے ورنہ اشکوں کے موتی بکھر جائیں گے
اب عنایت نہ ہوگی تو مرجائیں گے
یہ زمانے کے غم یہ ہزاروں ستم،
یا نبی تم سہارا نہ دوگے اگر، کس کو آواز دیں گے کدھر جائیں گے؟

[ix] نعت پڑھتے رہو گنگناتے رہو
آفتیں ان کے صدقہ میں ڈھل جائیں گی
درد و غم آئیں گے اور گزر جائیں گے
[x] کیسے چلے گی ہم سے یہ زندگی کی نیّا
کیوں چھوڑکر چلے ہو طوفان میں کھوَیّا
منجدھار میں ہماری نیّا نہ ڈوب جائے
ڈوبا گگن میں سورج لو چھا گیا اندھیرا
نہ جانے زندگی میں کب آئے گا سویرا

[xi] کھویا گیا کس طرح ترا جوہر ادراک
ہوتے نہیں کیوں تجھ سے ستاروں کے جگر چاک

[xii] وائے ناکامی متاع کارواں جاتا رہا
کارواں کے دل سے احساس زیاں جاتا رہا

آج بھی ہو جو براہیم کا ایماں پیدا [xiii]
آگ کرسکتی ہے انداز گلستاں پیدا

اے خاصۂ خاصان رسل وقت دعا ہے امت پہ تری آکے عجب وقت پڑا ہے [xiv]
جو دین بڑی شان سے نکلا تھا وطن سے پردیس میں وہ آج غریب الغرباء ہے

سیکڑوں الزام قید و بند سادہ سا جواب [xv]
ماننی پڑتی ہے ہم کو بردباری آن کی

اور بھی کچھ روز محسن کیجئے اس کا انتظار [xvi]
آج یا کل ایک دن ہونی ہے خواری آن کی

آج کچھ ایسا طے پایا ہے حق کے اجارہ داروں میں [xvii]
جو ہم پر ایمان نہ لائے چنوادو دیواروں میں
ہر ظالم سے ٹکر لی ہے سچے فنکاروں نے حفیظ
ہم وہ نہیں جو ڈرکر کہہ دیں ہم ہیں تابعداروں میں

توڑ ڈالیں جس کی تکبیریں طلسم شش جہات [xviii]
ہو نہ روشن اس خدا اندیش کی تاریک رات
ابن مریم مرگیا یا زندۂ جاوید ہے
ہیں صفاتِ ذاتِ حق حق سے جدا یا عین ذات؟
کیا مسلماں کے لیے کافی نہیں اس دور میں
یہ الٰہیات کے ترشے ہوئے لات و منات؟

'قصۂ آدم کو رنگیں کرگیا کس کا لہو [xix]

ایک دو زخم نہیں جسم ہے سارا چھلنی [xx]
درد بے چارہ پریشاں ہے کہاں سے اُٹھے

یاد ماضی عذاب ہے یارب چھین لے مجھ سے حافظہ میرا [xxi]

دیکھ رہا ہے کسی اور زمانے کا خواب آب روانِ کبیر تیرے کنارے کوئی [xxii]

وہ تیرگی ہے کہ اکثر خیال آتا ہے [xxiii]
مرے فلک پہ کوئی آفتاب ہے کہ نہیں

یہ زندگی جو بسر ہورہی ہے اے جذبیؔ [xxiv]
خدا ملے تو یہ پوچھوں عذاب ہے کہ نہیں

کیوں فنا سے ڈریں بقا کیا ہے؟ [xxv]
بجھ گیا دل ہی جب، رہا کیا ہے؟

یہ بتا دیجئے چھپا کیا ہے؟ گوشہ میں ان حسین آنکھوں کے [xxvi]

دل دھڑکتا ہے تو رونے کی صدا آتی ہے [xxvii]
ایک ہنگامہ سا رہتا تھا مکاں میں پہلے
اب جو ہے گرمیٔ بازار تو ہم اس میں نہیں
ہم ہی تھے گرمئی بازار جہاں میں پہلے

ہر بار پلٹتے ہوئے گھر کو، یہی سوچا [xxviii]
اے کاش کسی لمبے سفر کو گئے ہوتے
ہم خوش ہیں ہمیں دھوپ وراثت میں ملی ہے
اجداد کہیں پیڑ بھی کچھ بو گئے ہوتے

میں تانگہ کے بُم میں جتا جارہا تھا گرلس کالج کا تانگہ چلا جارہا تھا [xxix]

لیلي بھي ہم نشیں ہو تو محمل نہ کر قبول .تو رہ نورد شوق ہے ، منزل نہ کر قبول [xxx]
خانقاہِ عظمتِ اسلام ہے یہ سرزمیں [xxxi]
سوتے ہیں اس خاک میں خیرالامم کے تاجدار
نظمِ عالم کا رہا جن کی حکومت پر مدار‘

ہوگئے خاک انتہا یہ ہے آگ تھے ابتدائے عشق میں ہم [xxxii]

سدھاریں شیخ کعبے کو ہم انگلستان دیکھیں گے [xxxiii]
وہ دیکھیں گھر خدا کا ہم خدا کی شان دیکھیں گے

نہ گھبرائو مسلمانو خدا کی شان باقی ہے [xxxiv]
ابھی اسلام زندہ ہے ابھی قرآن باقی ہے
یہ کافر کیا سمجھتے ہیں جو اپنے دل میں ہنستے ہیں
ابھی تو کربلا کا آخری میدان باقی ہے

شب ہندی غلاماں را سحر نیست [xxxv]
بایں خاک آفتاب را گزر نیست

’ہمرے بابا کا لکھل ادھیکار چاہئے [xxxvi]
گولامی کے بوجھا ڈھوئے جب چاہے مرجی
اب جھوٹ نہ کوئی اکرار چاہئے، ہمرا یار چاہئے۔‘

وہ بات کرو پیدا تم اپنی زبانوں میں [xxxvii]
دنیا بھی کہے کچھ ہے ان بھیم دوانوں میں
گر بھیم نہیں ہوتے (تو) ہم آج کہاں جاتے
قسم بھگوان گوتم کی ہم کبھی کے مرگئے ہوتے
دباکر جیتے جی رکھا تھا ہم دلتوں کو ان پنڈوں نے

چوٹی والوں نے یہ بھگوے کپڑے والوں نے
چھوا چھوتی کا بوجھ لاد رکھا تھا ان غنڈوں نے
بہت ظلم و ستم کے تیر بے ایمانوں نے برسائے
ہمیں کھانا تو کیا ایک لوٹا بھر پانی کو ترسائے
قلم کی نوک پر بھیم رائو نے جب ان کو نچوائے
تبھی یہ بھیڑیے سیدھی طرح سے راہ پر آئے